

# ***JUMP CUT***

**A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA**

*Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*

Issue 09

October-December 1975

Source: [ejumpcut.org](http://ejumpcut.org)

*Jump Cut* was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

This electronic version was created with the approval of the *Jump Cut* editors and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

# Table of Contents

Jump Cut, no. 9, October-December 1975

Jaws by Peter Biskind  
White Line Fever by Madeline Tress  
The Engagement of Anna by Peter Pappas  
Nashville by Michael Klein  
Nashville by Steven Abrahams  
Dead Pigeon on Beethoven Street by Ernest Larsen  
Women's Happytime Commune by E. Ann Kaplan  
Children of Rage by Richard Wagner  
Numéro Deux by Reynold Humphries  
Cold War films by Lawrence L. Murray  
Red Nightmare by Michael J. Jackson  
Julia Reichert and Jim Klein interview by Lesage, Martineau, Kleinhans  
A blaxploitation theater by Demetrius Cope  
Blaxploitation's high school audience by M. Washington, M.J. Berlowitz  
Theories of Film reviewed by William Rothman  
Psychoanalysis and film: an exchange  
• Comment by Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath, and Colin MacCabe  
• A ventriloquist psychoanalysis by Chuck Kleinhans  
Report on (last?) Pesaro film festival by Julianne Burton  
Berkeley projectionists protest lock-out by John Hess  
Editorial: Out of the dark—building a community audience

To navigate:

Other than the table of contents the links inside a PDF are active.

Use the bookmarks to the left on a PDF file. If they don't appear click the small ribbon icon on the left edge.

Search by using ctrl-F (PC) or command-F (Mac). Clicking "Edit" on the top ribbon will bring up a menu that also has a find function (PC or Mac).

If you're on the Archive website then use the "Search inside" field at the top right.

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Jaws Between the teeth

by Peter Biskind

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 1, 26

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

JAWS needs no introduction. It is now six months since it was unleashed on an unsuspecting public, and it is still consuming money than its eponym gobbles down human dinners. In the first ten days of exhibition, it broke the box-office of GODFATHER I, taking in an estimated \$21,000,000. Audiences see it, return, and return again to be thrilled by the 25-foot shark—the great marine garbage disposal that eats its way through the imaginary beach colony of Amity, Long Island.

Blessed with a good script, a group of fine performances from an excellent cast, and razor sharp direction by 27-year-old wunderkind Steven Spielberg, JAWS was last summer's DEATH WISH, albeit with the more innocent appeal of a disaster movie for those who were uneasy with DEATH WISH's racism, and were therefore happier with sharks than with Puerto Rican muggers. They preferred to contemplate the joy of dismemberment in the briny deep to the dangers of the big city.

There used to be a time when JAWS' significance would have been apparent to all, when we wouldn't have had to cast about for symbolic meanings to hang on the shark. A few years ago, during the Cold War, the shark would have stood for International Communism, pure and simple. But these days, with the detente and the grain sales, that sort of symbolism is frowned upon, and Hollywood is tending towards politically neutral heavies. After having exhausted its store of natural and man-made disasters (EARTHQUAKE, TOWERING INFERNO, POSEIDON ADVENTURE, JUGGERNAUGHT, AIRPORT 75), the terrors of the supernatural (THE EXORCIST, RACE WITH THE DEVIL, BEYOND THE DOOR, ABBY, IT'S ALIVE), it has turned its attention to the animal kingdom and, with JAWS, hooked a big one. Unfortunately, given Hollywood's penchant for running a good thing into the ground, we can look forward to a species-by-species inventory of the natural world. We've already been menaced by rats (WILLARD), and can no doubt expect cats (CLAWS), bears (PAWS), and so on.

What's JAWS up to? According to the *New York Times*, it has resulted in a vast increase in the number of shark sightings off the East Coast. It has spawned a high growth industry of beach towels, posters, T-shirts, and spin-off books on shark lore. JAWS may do for sharks what THE WILD ONE did for motorcycles and THE HUSTLER did for pool. But despite its sociological diffidence, it is trying to tell us something. It may make us hesitate to swim in the ocean, or even to take a bath—but what else is there, if we read between the teeth?

JAWS is a middle-class *Moby Dick*. Whereas *Moby Dick* is a bleak and pessimistic epistemological allegory, JAWS is a tale of liberalism at sea, barely afloat in shark-infested waters, but nevertheless afloat. It is ultimately cathartic and comforting. True, both Ahab and Quint are destroyed by their respective aquatic antagonists, the great white whale in one and the great white shark in the other. But in *Moby Dick* the whale goes free, leaving only a friendless and certainly classless Ishmael bobbing up and down in the water. In JAWS, the shark is killed, blown to bits by an exploding compressed air canister. Its nemesis, a small town police chief possessed of all the middle-class virtues, dog-paddles home to shore, wife, and family.

The first few scenes of JAWS announce the thematic design which will govern the remainder of the film. It is night-time on the beach at Amity. The camera slowly pans in medium close up across a group of college kids at a beach party. There is music, a small fire, food, beer, and dope. The warm colors—reds and yellows—of lyricized well-being, health, and security suffuse the scene as the camera glides past the faces silhouetted against the fire, catching them in the midst of conversations, kisses, or stoned vacancies. It comes to rest on the face of a blond young man who is staring fixedly off-screen. An eyeline cut shows us who he is staring at: an equally blonde young woman who smiles invitingly, and then leads him on a romp across the dunes to the sea, disrobing all the way. She plunges in; he falls down drunk on the beach and passes out. To the tune of a throbbing, rhythmic score, which has since attained some popularity as “the dinner theme from JAWS,” she is promptly devoured by an unseen shark. He sleeps it off until the morning when he reports her missing.

The attack itself is shot in close up, with camera fastened on the woman's face, in a diabolical parody of all those Hollywood bedroom scenes in which the camera registers celluloid ecstasy by discretely holding on a face, while the attached body is presumably tripping the light fantastic off camera.

We need only consult the graffiti scrawled on the familiar ad for JAWS—the huge phallic head of a shark aimed suggestively at the midriff of a naked woman swimming on the surface of the water—to recognize that we are invited to put a sexual construction on the encounter between shark and woman, and indeed, such a view seems warranted by the facts. The shark, all too obviously, can only be the young man's sexual passion, a greatly enlarged, marauding penis. (Later on in the film, a

dead shark, slit open, exudes a white, sperm-like fluid.) This passion is aroused by the woman's own provocative behavior, and is freed from restraint by the young man's intoxication. His rational faculties, his inhibitions, his moral scruples are, quite literally, asleep. His conscious mind has abdicated its authority, allowing the monsters of the libido to hold sway.

It is helpful to ask of each of the shark's victims: why is he or she killed, and not someone else? In some instances, like the case of young Alex Kintner, there doesn't seem to be a particular reason. But the young woman is another story. In line with the film's conservative domesticity (more of which later), she is being punished for her sexual freedom and her forwardness (she invites him to follow her), both of which overturn the conventional sex roles that the film is at pains to affirm.

The first shark attack comes at night, as do several subsequent ones, like the comical scene in which two men go fishing from a wooden dock with a roast beef as bait, only to find one of them dragged, along with the dock, out to sea. The first major assault of the shark on Quint's boat also occurs at night and, more significantly, comes when the three men are drunk and unguarded, that is, when their conscious, rational faculties have been suspended. The lesson to be drawn from these scenes is that our security is so fragile and tenuous that the moment we relax our vigilance, all is lost.

The best-selling trailer for the film, Peter Benchley's novel *JAWS*, while dismally written, is much more suggestive than the film in establishing a level of sexual resonance for the shark. The connection between sleep, dream, the unconscious, and the shark becomes explicit in this description of police chief Martin Brody's fear of the water:

"In Brody's dreams, deep water was populated by slimy, savage things that rose from below and shredded his flesh, by demons that cackled and moaned."

Brody's fear of the water and fantasies of castration suggest impotence, the physical corollary of the moral cowardice later revealed in his failure to take a strong stand against Amity officials. His shaky sense of male identity is expressed by the threat of the shark; the shark, in turn, unmans him.

Moreover, references to rape (by blacks, no less) appear repeatedly in the book. One passage describes how Brody and Amity newspaper editor Meadows, in a preview of the shark cover-up, agree to hush up a few cases of rape because

"the specter of a black rapist stalking every female in Amity wouldn't do much for the tourist trade."

While the appearance of the shark brings in its wake a generalized fear of sexual violation, and a fairly specific threat to Brody's masculinity, this complex of sexual associations is given a class dimension by the

appearance of Matt Hooper. In the book, Hooper is the wealthy younger brother of an old beau of Ellen's. Ellen, once a member of Amity's fashionable society, has descended a few rungs by marrying Brody, and regrets the loss of her former status. A brief fling with Hooper is the perfect outlet for her class nostalgia. Brody senses the threat Hooper represents. Benchley describes Brody's uneasiness with animal metaphors that faintly evoke the shark:

"But he had felt threatened by the younger man—he wasn't really sure why—and the sensation was so alien that he had reached for the most convenient carapace."

Later, as they make love, Ellen also experiences Hooper as an alien, threatening, predatory presence ("the ferocity and intensity of his assault"). Benchley uses the same phrase to describe her fear as he uses for Brody:

"Ellen had become afraid—of what, she wasn't sure."

The subplot is omitted from the film, undoubtedly for reasons of economy, but with the result that in the film, the shark replaces Hooper as the sexual antagonist. And the hostility between Brody and Hooper is displaced onto the shark.

While later, in the film, the confusion between shark and human behavior is shown to be an error (Brody, scanning the water, mistakes a male bather's playful assault on a woman for a shark attack), nevertheless, the seed is sown. The only kind of heterosexual relationship revealed in the film—the extra or premarital one latent in the young couple's animal good spirits—is fantasized as the homicidal violation of a woman.

The effect of this fantasy is three-fold. First, all actual sexual relationships cease, including "safe" ones inside the confines of the nuclear family. (Ellen suggests to Martin that they "get drunk and have some fun," but Martin declines.) Second, the danger to women is so great that the men must protect them against it. The women in the film (Ellen Brody, Mrs. Kintner) play a dependent role, and are associated solely with domesticity, primarily child care. Third, the strength of the fantasy, coupled with the precariousness of the civilized society we usually take for granted, suggest that draconian measures, extreme psychic and social repression are necessary to defend against it.

The laissez-faire, business-as-usual approach of the city officials will not do. The beaches must be closed. That this measure is presented in the most favorable light points to the conflation, in the film's liberalism, of repression and morality. Brody's duty is clear. Under the circumstances, his decision to close the beaches is the only moral one, and represents a kind of state liberalism. The unregulated free market of competing business interests is outmoded. It's OK for Amity, but destructive to the larger human community of which Amity is only a part.

Therefore, it must be controlled, but by whom? The City Council, presumably the democratic heir of the New England town meeting, is unable to exercise such control because, while democratic, it does not represent the interests of the tourists, only the residents. The instrument of regulation, then, becomes not the polity but the police chief who, consulting his own conscience, is granted a vision which encompasses the whole body politic, not just a part. The police role is made palatable by the mild characterization of Brody who is not an authoritarian figure but, on the contrary, a family man.

While the shark serves as a convenient metaphor for sexual and class power, this metaphor is extended in the book to include the town's relation with its summer guests as well. It becomes clear that the town's handful of year-round residents need the summer traffic to survive the year. They live, as the editor of the Amity Leader makes clear, like parasites off a host:

“Call it parasitic if you will, but that's the way it is. The host animal comes every summer, and Amity feeds on it furiously, pulling every bit of sustenance it can before the host leaves again after Labor Day. Take away the host animal, and we're like dog ticks with no dog to feed on.”

Or, need we add, like sharks with no bathers to feed on.

Most disaster movies, employing a scapegoating populism which comes easily to Hollywood, take a dim view of the authorities (craven officials in *EARTHQUAKE*, corrupt executives in *TOWERING INFERNO*), and *JAWS* is no exception. The only difference lies in the energy with which the book and to a lesser extent the film, exploits the Watergate connection.

Mayor Larry Vaughan is Amity's Nixon. He repeatedly invokes “the public interest” as Nixon invoked “national security” to legitimate the various extravagances of his administration. It is in the service of public interest that Amity officials refuse to close the beaches, and cover up the initial shark attack by altering the cause of death in the medical report. Although the book takes special pains to underline the link between Vaughan and Nixon (Brody refers to Vaughan, with heavy irony, as “the people's choice”), the film, in an exemplary expression of post-Watergate backlash, treats Vaughan with a good deal of sympathy. He is a weak, not a venal man.

Moreover, he does indeed reflect the interests of the town. At the City Council meeting convened to discuss the shark problem, the town's respectable business people—motel operators, realtors, shopkeepers—who double as council members, agree to conduct business as usual. Like the Nixon administration, they identify their own narrow self-interest with an equally ungenerous version of the public interest. What is true of the relationship between the nameless couple who figure in the film's opening scene is true of the town as a whole. Like the young man's rational faculties, which have been clouded by drink, the conscience of

the town has abdicated its proper role. For a moment, it looks like the film is about to ask: who are the real sharks? But just as it is ready to pose this question, the film cuts bait and runs.

In an abrupt change of focus, the political categories with which JAWS had flirted are suddenly naturalized. Brody's moral cowardice in the face of social pressure is subsumed by "real" physical cowardice: fear of the shark. Even the psychosexual elements in his phobic fear of the water becomes secondary to the actual physical menace of the shark—which we see and experience with him. There are monsters beneath the sea which, as Quint later finds out, threaten real castration and death. Thus the psychological associations that have accrued to the shark during the first part of the movie (when, in fact, the shark was rarely seen—therefore serving as an ideal vehicle for such anxieties) fall away in the face of concrete, not metaphorical danger.

Once the film takes to the water, it becomes a male adventure story, another DELIVERANCE, dealing with themes of heroism and initiation. Brody, Hooper, and Quint offer us three versions of manhood, and the shark (or, rather, the film) selects the one most appropriate to the mid-seventies. Curiously enough, it is when JAWS moves away from overt political comment that its politics become most evident.

If JAWS were a rightwing populist fantasy like WALKING TALL, or a revolutionary liberal film like DEATH WISH, the vigilante Quint would be its hero, and both Brody and Hooper would meet watery deaths. But it is not, and it is Quint who dies. Quint is an anachronism, a composite of the last vestiges of ruthless Yankee self-reliance, traces of working class pride, and a touch of New England transcendental madness, a true spiritual heir of Ahab.

The reason Quint must die is that he is too powerful, too independent of traditional social ties, too prone to excess—and he pays for it. He lacks proper respect for conventional pieties; he scandalizes Ellen Brody with his off-color humor and raunchy songs; he extorts \$10,000 from the desperate town council to kill the great white. He is nearly as dangerous to the social fabric of Amity as the shark itself. From the point of view of the film's comfortable liberalism, Quint's combination of working class toughness and bourgeois independence is alien and frightening. He is viewed as irrational and out of control. Authority must be restored, but not by Quint.

Hooper, on the other hand, is the mirror image of Quint. He is associated with technology rather than experience, inherited wealth rather than self-made sufficiency. His own boat, loaded with electronic gear, is a veritable anti-shark panopticon and contrasts sharply with Quint's antique "Orca," as does the delicate tip of his poisonous spear with Quint's more robust harpoon and barrel arrangement. (The sexual symbolism, although pushed into the background, is still present. Each of the three men is associated with an appropriate phallus: Quint's fishing rod, and then harpoon; Hooper's dart; Brody's guns.)



But despite their dissimilarities, Quint and Hooper have more in common with each other than either does with Brody. Both participate in marine machismo, swapping stories and comparing wounds received in the service of the sea, while Brody, afraid of the water and barely able to swim, stands by uneasily. Brody is third man out in what might develop as a male camaraderie film. He is the domesticated husband excluded from a latent love affair between Quint and Hooper. Quint (the old pro) and Hooper (the young apprentice) bear a marked resemblance to Thunderbolt and Lightfoot, with Robert Shaw playing Clint Eastwood's dominant role, and Richard Dreyfuss playing Jeff Bridge's submissive one.

Hooper adopts a submissive role towards the shark as well, and he is the only one of the three men who actually enters the water, the female element. For him, the shark is less an antagonist than an object of admiration and even love. (He tells Ellen he has always "loved" sharks.) He's more interested in shark fucking than shark hunting. He even goes so far as to offer himself as bait in the cage (shark teasing). But as soon as he is jolted from behind by the toothy phallus, he loses his own puny erection (the spear). Unmanned, he can no longer hope to consummate his relationship with the shark. He can only hide and watch.

As two candidates for a seventies camaraderie film, Quint and Hooper are two complementary aspects of the sixties Hollywood image of the U.S. male. They are the two halves of James Bond. Hooper is the leisure class, suave, technological side of Bond, the Bond of gadgets, gambling casinos, and choice wines. Quint is the macho side of Bond, the tough underlay of working class street fighter, not quite obliterated by karate, Savile Row suits, and civil service manners. In fact, at one point in their comical competition, Quint proposes a toast to their separate legs, placing his over Hooper's, as if to reconstitute the two into one person. But this is impossible. And the shark sees to it that this male image is further dismembered. Dismemberment itself becomes a metaphor for the breakdown of heroism as it was defined by the Bond figure. (It should be remarked here that JAWS is the first aboveground, or above water manifestation of the flourishing dismemberment cult apparent in the wide following of such films as THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE.)

After Vietnam, Watergate, and the CIA revelations, this image of the Cold War secret agent can no longer maintain its integrity. It disintegrates into its component parts, the brittle Quint and the ineffectual technician Hooper. Despite the film's obvious fascination with Quint, and its affection for Hooper's cheeky wisecracking, neither extreme is viable. Quint is dangerous and must be killed; Hooper is chastened and allowed to survive, but only at the price of relinquishing his special tools, which have proved useless.

The latently homosexual male bonding of the 70s camaraderie films was immanent in the Bond films. Bond always treated women like dirt, and we always knew they didn't do it for him, because the only person he

really loved was himself. With the aid of Freud's analysis of male love as displaced narcissism, it is only a short step to the male couples of such films as *THUNDERBOLT AND LIGHTFOOT*, *THE STING*, and *SCARECROW*, where the homosexual undertow becomes somewhat more (although far from) explicit. In the case of *JAWS*, the shark destroys the nascent relationship between Quint and Hooper, by "eating" Quint. Since the film begins with the eating of a woman, and ends with the eating of a man, we've come full circle. If unmarried heterosexual love is fantasized as homicidal violation, homosexual love is no different. All that remains is love in the safety of the family, and the shark ultimately becomes the guarantor of domesticity.

It is in the selection of Brody as hero, and in its attempt to carve out a sensible middle ground between extremes, that *JAWS*' corporate auteurs (Doubleday/Benchley and Universal/Spielberg) show their hands. For Brody represents the liberal male role model, softer and more humane than the neofascist aviators offered in recent films like *WALKING TALL* and *DIRTY HARRY*. He is a reversion to the family man of the fifties. As played by Roy Scheider, Brody becomes a slightly younger, sanded-down and sleeker version of George C. Scott, that warhorse of Hollywood liberalism (*PATTON* excepted). Scott specializes in playing dogged, long-suffering, guilt-ridden professionals, like the doctor in *HOSPITAL* who finally takes a stand against institutional corruption on the one hand and hippie irresponsibility on the other, choosing instead the unsung path of loyalty to his own integrity, his own idea of himself.

This is the liberal self-image, of course, the principled man-of-good-will holding fast against the tug of extremes, guarding the vital center against subversion from the right and the left. In Benchley's book, this becomes clear when Brody is ganged up on in the town council by both ends of the political spectrum—the blacks, on the one hand, afraid of losing their menial service jobs, and the property owners on the other, afraid of losing summer business.

Although this particular point is omitted from the film, it is clear that Brody, for all his lapses, is indeed the man of principle, beleaguered by enemies at every turn: from above by an elitism of wealth and technology (Hooper); from below by macho common man individualism (Quint) and beyond him by the specter of a rowdy populism (the mob of beer-sodden, blue-collar, Sunday sailors) and on all sides by the commercial self-interest of the city fathers (Vaughan).

The film repudiates Quint's extreme individualism only to endorse a milder and more reasonable kind. The outcome of the action bears out Brody's contention that in Amity (as opposed to New York City, where he used to work), "one man makes a difference." Brody is a good reflection of the new, hang-tough urban liberalism, tired of being bitten by the mouths it has so virtuously fed, tired of muggings and "welfare rip-offs." It imagines itself in the guise of the cop, but a very special cop, since it would like to have its cake and eat it too. It wants to identify with

law 'n' order but at the same time wishes to reserve for itself the traditional requisites of its own view of itself. The cop in question, in other words, is a sensitive, guilt-ridden family man, a Woody Allen rather than a Dirty Harry or a Popeye Doyle.

Brody, does, of course, momentarily break down in the face of threats and community pressure. He goes along with the cover-up, keeps the beaches open, and is therefore responsible for Alex Kintner's death. He is publicly humiliated by the boy's bereaved mother, who slaps him in the face and all but accuses him of murder. The film is remarkably indulgent of his moral cowardice. The encounter with Mrs. Kintner is shown from his point of view. And, when the scene of the action shifts from the realm of moral choice on land to the realm of adventure at sea, JAWS allows Brody to reestablish his ethical credibility through a purely physical encounter with the shark, an encounter which becomes an act of atonement.

Brody is viewed so sympathetically because he is one of us, with all our weaknesses. He is a reluctant voyager, constantly calling his wife on ship-to-shore telephone and, sensibly enough, the Coast Guard to request a larger boat. He stands outside the macho gamesmanship of Quint and Hooper. He has no particular expertise, except with his Police Special, which proves quite useless. His triumph, at the end, is more a testimony to his persistence and luck; he finally comes into his own with only a minute left to play. Brody wins out because of what he isn't, and what he can't do, rather than what he is and can do. He lacks the privilege of Hooper and the experience of Quint. He survives precisely because he's unexceptional and ordinary, while the exceptional men are killed (Quint) or neutralized (Hooper). Brody comes in on a wing and a prayer. His is the victory of Yankee ingenuity, of making do with spit and chewing gum. JAWS flatters us by holding out the promise that such a triumph over unspeakable terror is within reach of us all.

Finally, Brody is a Jerry Ford figure, a nobody who makes it while everybody else auto-destructs. He may not be able to swim and chew gum, but at least he has learned how to swim.

### *White Line Fever* A collective drama

by Madeline Tress

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 3-4

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

If WHITE LINE FEVER cult following, it will be surprising. Its three week run in St. Louis was in the B picture graveyard—drive-ins and local neighborhood theaters. For a week prior to its release, St. Louis newspaper ads for the film depicted Jan-Michael Vincent standing with clenched fist in front of his semi-tractor trailer. The ad told its potential audience:

“Meet Carroll Jo Hummer, a working man who’s had enough.”

The advertising campaign leads us to believe that he is a disgruntled, oppressed worker who has been consistently ripped off by powerful and corrupt organizations for most of his working life. Certainly not an ad that would entice the suburban middle and upper middle classes to run and see this film (the distributors no doubt knew this, which is why it went immediately into the film graveyard.) Columbia Pictures itself writes in the promotional material:

“It is the type of motion picture to which millions of American workers throughout the country will relate. It should—it’s *their* story.” (Emphasis is Columbia’s, not mine.)

By contrast, though, the ad in August 31st *New York Times* went: “They had a dream, each other and a fight to the finish,” showing Jerri (Kay Lenz) and Carroll Jo Hummer hugging each other with a rig in the background.

The specific sociology of WHITE LINE FEVER may be questionable: e.g., is an owner-operator or independent trucker a petty-bourgeois rather than a worker? But the film’s intent is not: Hummer is a worker prevented from practicing his trade by both corporate capital and the state. In this sense, WHITE LINE FEVER is both anti-corporate and anti-authoritarian. In ways that will become clear from an actual discussion of the plot, Hummer is something more than either the

classic loner rebel so popular in the bourgeois-dream-gone-sour motif or the standard populist demagogue. Elements from both traditions are present in the film, but the characterizations of Hummer and his wife, and their relations with other truckers that emerges in the film, defy such easy categorization.

The film opens with Hummer returning from the war—unnamed, but Indochina of course—somewhat a hero and ready to actualize his dream of being an owner-operator of a diesel cab. Although Hummer's war credentials don't figure prominently in the film after the first few frames, they were surely deemed necessary by the producers for a very clichéd reason—to establish Hummer's loyalty as a U.S. citizen, root him right in the heart of the U.S. experience and above all, legitimate his later rebelliousness. The war experience also provides an easy explanation of Hummer's accuracy with a carbine rifle, which does figure prominently in later parts of the film.

The film moves briskly from the beginning. Hummer mortgages his next few years to buy his beloved \$30,000 "Blue Mule" and looks forward to mile after mile of white line fever, trucking songs, and a stable marriage with his childhood sweetheart turned wife. He has no ambition other than to do his work with the greatest skill and efficiency possible. The only success myth he buys is his own. Trucking is a decent, honorable profession. Hummer has little knowledge or regard for an alleged capitalist hierarchy of financial rewards and prestige. He doesn't understand a concept like "making it"—his world is circumscribed by a love for his work and his wife. Soon, however, his plans are destroyed by the large trucking firm with which he contracts for his initial haul.

Contacting a shipping company in Tucson which is managed by Duane Haller, an old family friend, Carroll Jo is informed that his initial load will include a few "extra items" not specified on the delivery sheet: contraband cigarettes and liquor. When Hummer protests out of naiveté and simple honesty, Haller informs him that it is not his own decision. The friend claims that this is the only way that the company can realize a high level of profits. Haller, we will later find out, is a patsy for the Glass House organization which is owned by a young, hip businessman who does nothing all day except drink and try to seduce his secretaries. (These young women, in non-middle class USA, are still teasing their hair, wearing 1/4 inch of make-up, incessantly chewing gum, and wear the shortest of mini-skirts.) Hummer will also be murdered during the course of the film by this corrupt organization.

Hummer refuses to compromise his integrity and finds himself involved in a fight with the guys on the loading dock. After the first fight occurs, Haller lets him do the job without the cigarettes. However, his troubles are merely beginning at this point—already he has been blackballed throughout the state and labeled a trouble-maker by the Glass House to both other companies and to the police. Once on the road he is arrested by the deputy sheriff, who handcuffs him to his cab and lets the dock workers finish him off. The message is clear: work on the company's

terms or don't work at all.

Gradually, by refusing to abandon his dreams, Hummer earns the companionship and respect of other truckers and dock workers at the company. An embryonic caucus of both black and white workers forms with Carroll Jo as the nominal leader. His actions have been a catalyst for the other workers who, by implication, shared Hummer's feelings of anger but necessity of maintaining their jobs. By now, WHITE LINE FEVER has moved quite naturally out of the internal-combustion-engine formula picture (with chase scenes starring semi-tractor trailers rather than motorcycles or automobiles) and the individualist model of one worker's life and desires into an essentially collective drama—the workers see the need for social action to oppose the company-police alliance and realize that it must be done collectively.

WHITE LINE FEVER, unlike most of the recent films which portray working people and lower middle class people as their main characters, does it without the disdain implicit in NASHVILLE or explicit in JAWS. Kaplan, unlike Altman and Spielberg, does not dismiss his non-bourgeois protagonists as either neurotic hillbillies who want to make it in the country music world even if it means total humiliation or as “goddamn working class heroes” using the social tactics of reverse snobbism. We see a young worker who is urged on by everyone—his wife, his friends, his co-workers. We see racism within the working class destroyed when a young militant black finally—decides to ally with Hummer after an older black trucker gets involved in the rebellion and convinces the younger man that he is not being a Tom in his actions.

We do not see a benign depiction of any of the organization bosses. Perhaps they were intentionally construed to be evil and corrupt stereotypes for the largely working class audience. These corporate goons are interested in one thing only—making huge profits by convincing their truckers that by transporting contraband goods they will not only not get busted but will also get some monetary compensation for their efforts. Anyone who refuses to benefit from this scheme will no doubt pay for it.

The remainder of the film is largely action cum violence. There are chase scenes, shoot outs with the company thugs and police and repeated physical and psychological assaults on Hummer—his house is firebombed, his black allies are murdered, his wife is beaten up. He is arrested for murdering Duane Haller (but is acquitted on his wife's testimony—a mostly working class jury realizes that he has been framed by the corporation). In form, the action and violence doesn't differ from a number of other films where one has taken the law into his own hands.

But there is an important difference—WHITE LINE FEVER's violence is neither abstract or unjustified. It is an older form of violence, one which the audience would think to be more respectable and humane since it is the violence of social protest. It is a necessary part of a social movement in process and the structure of the film constantly reminds the audience that this is the case. Yet these scenes never manage to achieve a life of

their own. There is no cult of violence at work here for the action is not a tool of escape or indulgence, for either the characters or the audience. Rather, it's a necessary recognition of what must be done under intolerable pressure when there is no other redress.

By the film's conclusion, the economic analysis has deepened somewhat. We are made to understand that there is probably one holding company for all the state's trucking lines. The audience is so incensed against the ruling class that during the climatic scene, when Hummer drives the Blue Mule through the Glass House at more than 70 mph roaring up a 45-foot ramp and then soars 60 feet through the air, that we jeer and clap, for at least the villain has been symbolically destroyed. Yet, despite this feat (which cost the studio \$130,000 to stage) and Hummer's survival of it which lands him in the hospital but in dubious physical condition, we are quickly returned to reality. The film really does not have a happy ending in bourgeois terms.

The average U.S. worker goes \$20,000 in debt in an attempt to seem middle class. Much of her/his net income is used to pay off that debt. Workers don't have stocks and bonds to sell begrudgingly when things start looking bad; a working class family has no savings for a rainy day. Hummer became a trucker to make enough money to seem middle class in an honorable, individualistic way. He didn't go to college; he went to the Air Force. He didn't meet and marry an independent woman; he wedded a woman who went from one parental situation right into another one. Hummer exemplifies the worker's dilemma: debt to the capitalist system, both literally (\$30,000 for The Blue Mule plus the mortgage on his new house) and figuratively, aspiring to be middle class.

Jerri Hummer also has middle class hopes and aspirations; she doesn't want a trucker for a husband, but someone who will geographically be there as part of a nuclear family. She wants a child, but doesn't want to raise it with an absentee father. Her alienation by doing mechanical and boring work in a bottling plant registers in her relationship with Carroll Jo at home. She doesn't want to be told to hurry up all day long. She wants to know if Carroll Jo really thinks that a day care center would check out her nonexistent college credentials so that she can get out of the factory into more fulfilling work.

They try very hard to seem middle class. But neither Carroll Jo nor Jerri view their lives with any thought of a distant future. Trucking will not make them rich. They'll probably save nothing for real vacations, for their retirement, for a child's higher education, for medical bills. The film seems to have an upbeat ending—Hummer survives and his following has rallied to his support outside of the hospital. However, we also see Jerri Hummer staring from another hospital window, weary and bleary-eyed, suggesting that there is no ending in sight to their struggle. Added to the sheer mental exhaustion of Carroll Jo and Jerri Hummer are also the following factors. We know that he has totaled his rig, he can possibly be a paraplegic, the house has been burned, Jerri's

first pregnancy has resulted in miscarriage, friends have been murdered. The trucking industry has no doubt blackballed him permanently. And they probably neither have major medical insurance nor money to pay any of the medical bills. At best Carroll Jo could have died and his wife could have married into the middle class and forgotten about all of this as part of a distant past.

But the way things turn out show that the corporations still exist, and the police force is still in conspiracy with the employers. The Hummers are unskilled, uneducated and possibly physically disabled and might have to spend the rest of their lives in factories or on welfare, forfeiting their aspirations of becoming middle class Americans. They certainly will not think of going underground—skipping town and assuming aliases is something workers rarely do. Of course, one could also be optimistic and assume that the situation has changed. The owner-operators now have their own organization, they will present their own demands to the companies and will do whatever is necessary to perform their jobs in the ways they see fit. There is no good reason why a genuinely collective, worker-run industry could not emerge from this group in time.

WHITE LINE FEVER will not be the sleeper of 1975. Columbia's means of distributing the film have destroyed any hope of that. But by placing it in the genre of the southern drive-in film which is aimed at a white working class audience, the only people who can relate to it will because they go to drive-ins and neighborhood theaters. The audience is not the slick and sophisticated, the elitist-intellectual filmgoer who spends an hour and a half waiting to see a film at Ghirardelli Square or on Third Avenue and 59th Street. This audience is the working class family who can dress the kids up in pajamas and let them sleep in the back seat of the car while they watch a film. The economics of the situation clarifies this point. Workers usually go to drive-ins where they pay per car rather than per person and don't have to worry about hiring a babysitter. Workers don't see films like Antonioni's THE PASSENGER because they are mystified into believing that they won't be able to relate to the film, and because they can't afford \$3.50 a head to see it at a first-run theater and also pay a babysitter. First-run moviegoers won't see WHITE LINE FEVER because it's showing at a drive-in, doesn't star any well-known actors, and utilizes a very action/ violence and pro-working class advertising campaign. One of the few pro-working class films to have a moderate middle class following was THE SUGARLAND EXPRESS and that probably had more to do with Goldie Hawn's appearance than anything else.

The middle class, for the most part, would subscribe to the attitude that Carroll Jo Hummer should ship the goddamn cigarettes and take whatever kickback he'll get from the corporations. They don't understand that they too are just as oppressed by a system that convinces them if they don't buy and consume there isn't much else to do. A bourgeois white collar worker views the working class as her/his enemy. If independent operators strike because of fuel price increases,



the elite sees it as an inconvenience and makes absolutely no attempt to understand how people who have to work for a living behave. Why are they striking, he/she'll think, they're losing salary. But a worker knows that another \$50 isn't going to make him/her rich—at best it would probably help pay another overdue bill. This is something that the average elitist filmgoer refuses to understand, simply because he can easily afford \$3.50 a ticket. Such a viewer rationalizes that poor people remain poor because they blow their salaries in bars and basically don't know how to handle money. The business executive forgets that a larger proportion of working people's salaries are used for survival alone, plus they get to pay exorbitant 18% interest rates on commodities purchased, all in the myth of seeming middle class.

WHITE LINE FEVER manages to take several formula plots and merge them into something more significant and better. Real people with real problems constantly transcend the limits the formulae should impose on them. Even the tendency to fetishize the internal combustion engine and marksmanship is kept in subordination to the larger concerns of the film. It is making a political statement, but it is by no means revolutionary. It is simply a film about people deeply committed to their lives and their work. In Hummer's case, that commitment extends beyond just being a good driver. It also shows how the large corporation will do everything that it can to undermine any efforts on the parts of their workers to avoid alienating job situations. Even if the workers don't ally with each other, the corporations certainly see them linked into a cooperative network as evidenced by the Glass House's constant abuse of Hummer, their murder of his employer Haller, and the murders of the black operators involved in the truckers' rebellion. The film shows that all workers are oppressed and that the myths that blacks will take jobs from whites or women will steal jobs from men are perpetuated by the ruling class to keep the masses divided. It involves a conception of how work should be organized and what morality should govern work. Finally, it shows that once an oppressed class is aware of its oppressor (in this case the independent operators versus the holding corporations), it will cease to perpetuate intra-class violence and hostility and start using its collective energy to destroy its oppressor. (That is a point argued by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, using colonial Algeria as a case in point.)

WHITE LINE FEVER is progressive in much the same way that BATTLE OF ALGIERS and SUGARLAND EXPRESS are progressive films, but it is not revolutionary. It has no aura of elitism—it is no worker's film directed by a celebrated European artist as in the case of Vittorio de Sica's A BRIEF VACATION. Bourgeois critics praise films like HEARTS AND MINDS and BATTLE OF ALGIERS because of each film's ability to provoke guilt around past issues of imperialism, i.e., the horrors after the fact. They fail to see these are oppressive situations which must be changed.

WHITE LINE FEVER shows us everyone's oppression by ruling class America in America (as opposed to Indochina). It does so without being

elitist, pretentious or esoteric. It posits no utopia but is an affirmation of people and their humanity which is revolutionary enough these days. It's too bad that the majority of film critics saw fit to give it nothing but mostly unfavorable reviews and completely discounted any political implications because of the formulae used in the film. WHITE LINE FEVER was set up for unfavorable reviews to begin with since it was dumped immediately into drive-ins and neighborhood movie theaters, hardly the place that the high brow critic and filmgoer would look for a masterpiece. It's too bad, because the majority of middle class filmgoers avoided it because it didn't start out in one first run movie house. As a result, critics perceived it as nothing but trash (which it is not), thereby making its own fate all too analogous to the working class which it represents.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

### *The Engagement of Anna* Toward the definition of a new Greek cinema

by Peter Pappas

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 4-6

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

In a very real sense, it is almost a *non sequitur* to speak of a new Greek cinema; in essence there has never been an old one. And not simply in the sense that there has never been a dynamic film tradition like those in the U.S. or France or the U.S.S.R. or Germany, but in the much more crucial sense that an attempt was never made to *create* a tradition, to foster a cinema based on the particular reality of Greek experience. In this refusal to come to terms with film's significance to national culture, Greece stands almost alone. There are very few countries—and here I include the so-called under or semi-developed countries -- which, though coming to the cinema very late, cannot at this moment lay claim to at least one filmmaker who, while starting out from his or her own country's experience as the foundation, has come to receive international recognition. Consider the roles of Satyajit Ray, Miklos Jancso, Ousmane Sembene, Alain Tanner, Dusan Makaveyev, the entire Polish cinema, the Brazilian Cinema Novo, Miguel Littin, the post-revolutionary Cuban cinema. The list is almost endless. And, of course, there are filmmakers such as Bergman, Buñuel, Fellini, and Godard, who have become so "universal" that we tend to lose sight of the national character which is at the foundation of their work. But in Greece, film never developed.

To a very real extent it was not the fault of Greek filmmakers themselves. After the end of the Second World War and the Greek Civil War of 1946-1949, Greek cinema developed on the Hollywood model—and the worst of Hollywood at that. Greek films were then, and are still now, controlled by three or four major production companies on the style of the old Hollywood studios. In addition, the political climate in postwar Greece was not conducive to any kind of development or experimentation in any of the arts, let alone the newest and the one considered by many the most revolutionary. The Greece of the 50s was a conservative and fearful society where artistic development not only had

to take account of the inevitable and huge censorship apparatus, but in more cases than not, the security forces themselves.

But, as is always the case, some sort of development did take place and this was also true in the cinema. But in that development itself we can see most clearly the cost of cultural reaction and artistic compromise. The two films from Greece that made the greatest impression not only outside but inside the country have been NEVER ON SUNDAY and ZORBA THE GREEK, both, incidentally, filmed in English. That fact is not a mere coincidence but a symptomatic indication of a more profound malaise. These two films represent precisely the nature of the Greek cinema until very recently.

NEVER ON SUNDAY was directed by Jules Dassin, an American who because of McCarthyism resettled in Paris and after marrying actress Melina Mercouri, in Athens. That quick sketch of Dassin describes the film perfectly. It is a travelogue, a tourist poster, an advertisement for Piraeus, for the various ruins to be found around Athens and, of course, for Melina Mercouri. It is Greece observed by a tourist, a passerby—and perhaps, even a little less. There are, after all, tourists who are much more perceptive than Homer (the leading character in the film, a U.S. tourist played by Dassin). But Homer-Dassin is not that kind of tourist. He is the kind with the Japanese camera, the American Express card, and a profound indifference to the essential nature of the land he is visiting.

Four years after NEVER ON SUNDAY, ZORBA THE GREEK was released. The difference between them is as immense as the distance between Hollywood and Crete. Michael Cacoyannis is Greek (though strictly speaking, a Cypriote) and commands a much more fundamental awareness of Greek reality than Dassin, though it must be said in Dassin's defense, he had also attempted to bring Kazantzakis to the screen in his film HE WHO MUST DIE, an adaptation of The Greek Passion. Nonetheless, to deal with Kazantzakis, as Cacoyannis correctly understood, is more than simply trying to be faithful to an author's work. It is coming to terms with the most influential mythmaker and legend-creator of modern Greece. It is because Cacoyannis understood this that his film was an aesthetic success. One can truly say that the film is, in a sense, more Zorbaesque than the book. Cacoyannis distilled the essence of Kazantzakis' novel without compromising either the texture of the book or its latent darkness and pessimism.

There is no doubt that the film, for what it was, was very good. But the question remains, what was it? It was a film based on a literary legend—and the word "literary" is what is significant in this context. There is no argument with the validity of using the myth as the basis for a national art, especially in film. What must be emphasized though is that the myth on which Cacoyannis based his film was not one born from the popular experience, from the long history of what is known in Greece as the folk experience, the experience chronicled in endless folk songs and popular legends.

It was based on a literary myth, a myth that as far as the popular sentiment is concerned is inauthentic. In contradistinction to a work like Littin's *THE PROMISED LAND* or, what may be the best known example, the films of Miklos Jancso, Cacoyannis' *ZORBA THE GREEK*—and for that matter his *ELECTRA* and *TROJAN WOMEN*, as well as Dassin's *PHAEDRA* and *HE WHO MUST DIE*—is not a film grown from the home soil of its native land, it is not a popular legend but an intellectual attempt at legend. When Kazantzakis wrote *Zorba the Greek*, he was self-consciously creating a modern Greek hero that he wanted to be considered the heir to Odysseus and Achilles.

But the point is that in their two thousand year history since the end of the classical age, the Greek people have created their own heroes and legends. These are the ones that constitute the authentic foundation to a national art based on recreating the experience of the Greek people. The art should be based not on the metaphors of literary artists but the metaphors of the people themselves, the folk tales of the peasant woman and the fisherman, the urban worker and the shepherd. And even more important than dealing with the legends of these people is dealing with the people themselves, with their history and experience, their sorrows and joys, and, in the last analysis, with the story of their oppression and their resistance to it—and even perhaps with their inability to resist. Because this approach must inevitably lead to an authentic statement of the condition of the Greek nation, it is this approach which has finally prevailed among Greek filmmakers. And it is to them, to this young generation, that I now turn.

The period of the early to mid-60s was a very turbulent one in Greece. It was a time of intense and many times violent political activity, of the development of an enormous and dynamic youth movement, of mass strikes and demonstrations, and of the fall of the conservative government. At the same time, it was also a period of what has popularly become known in Greece as a renaissance of cultural and artistic activity. It was a time of great hope and anticipation for the cultural future of the country. And of course filmmakers, especially younger filmmakers, shared in this general exhilaration and optimism. But on April 21, 1967, a group of colonels executed a putsch, abolished the parliamentary government, suspended the Constitution, and set up a seven and a half year period of rule the result of which, besides being a period of political repression and economic chaos, was nothing less than the imposition of a cultural Dark Age.

But it was in this Dark Age that the new generation of filmmakers was to grow and mature, it was in this Dark Age that they would finally develop a cinema based not on abstractions and warmed-over variations on the same theme but on the fact of Greece, of everyday Greece, the Greece of light and warmth and radiance but also the Greece of political terror, poverty, ignorance, and Medieval social relationships. This was and is the Greece of the new filmmakers. It is a Greece every bit as brilliant, complex, and tragic as the Greece of the Homeric epic and the Aeschylean tragedy. And most important of all, and unprecedented in

the history of the Greek film, it is a Greece shorn of lies and sentimental distortions. It is stark and naked like the Greek landscape itself.

The first indication that a new tendency, if not a “new wave,” was developing in Greek cinema came at the Cannes festival, 1973, and at the New Directors/ New Films festival at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1974, with the presentation of Theo Angelopoulos’ film, DAYS OF 36. Ostensibly the film is about the arrest of a petty criminal in connection with the assassination of a labor leader, and his subsequent seizing as a hostage a Conservative deputy who has come to visit him in his cell. By any historical standard it was a minor political incident. It is not so much the fact of the assassination that Angelopoulos is interested in as it is the fact or the social situation, if I may call it that, of the country at that precise historical point. Unlike a film like Z, DAYS OF 36 shows almost no interest in the machinations of power and corruption (though it is obvious that corruption exists, so much so as a matter of fact that with Angelopoulos’ camera one can almost see it springing from the land itself), or in the dynamics and intensity of the investigation to uncover the conspiracy behind the assassination.

What motivates Angelopoulos is the social condition and the social relations that are not only at the basis of the assassination, but more importantly, the foundation on which the country itself rests. And that is why, again as opposed to a film like Z or STATE OF SIEGE, it is a slow-paced film. DAYS OF 36 is shot and edited at a pace that is the cinematic equivalent of a hot Mediterranean summer—slow, lethargic, deliberate in every movement and gesture. More than that, it is shot with a fidelity to detail, emotional as well as environmental, and an economy of movement that is the equivalent of an analytical dissection of a particular societal apparatus at a given historical moment.

In connection with the above I would like to quote from an interview that Angelopoulos gave to Ulrich Gregor for the International Forum of Young Cinema at the Berlin film festival in 1973.

G. What events is the film based on, what is its historical background?

A. At the beginning it was rather like the reconstruction of a “fait divers,” in fact, of a prisoner who attacks with a revolver a Member of Parliament who comes to visit him. It then turned out that the prisoner and the M.P. were old acquaintances and that there were unclear connections between them.

G. Does this link really exist between the murder of a trade-unionist and the affair of the M.P. as it comes up in the film?

A. No. I brought that in. You can say that I've made a montage out of the events: there was an uprising in a prison, and there was also the murder of a trade-unionist but that was a little later. I linked these events to one another in order

to reproduce the climate of an epoch. In the film it is only a few days.

G. A few days which characterize a whole epoch.

A. Exactly. You can see very well that we are talking about a time when the working-class movement first achieved a real meaning. There were strikes and demonstrations. That was a climate which I can't describe to you now. One would have to dig right back ...

G. There is no portrayal nor concrete analysis of the political facts in the usual sense.

A. I'm really aiming at producing a climate. It is a climate of terror, and the story of the attempts of certain people to prove their innocence by accusing other innocents, but who were then prevented from doing this.

.....

It is the reconstruction of an epoch, the recreation of an historical climate which is at the basis of Angelopoulos' work. He is interested neither in documentary accuracy nor in agitprop. His purposes always remain analytical precise, and complete. in the sense of presenting a total image, a *complete* picture of an epoch, of a people, of a nation.

The movie is not overtly and simpl-mindedly accusatory, but rather descriptive, analytical, indeed reflective. And it was made in the Greece of the Colonels. (One could very well ask—where else should a Greek make a film about Greece if he wanted to make it in 1972?) For these reasons, some rather silly people involved in the various Greek democratic and resistance organizations condemned it as “compromised” or “self-censored.” They had missed the point entirely. Obviously, Angelopoulos had no intention of making a parallel to Z. His sole purpose was to make a comment on the condition of his country in the early summer of 1936—a condition that could possibly provide parallels to the state of his country thirty-five years later.

The conclusive evidence that there is in fact a new cinema in full development in Greece was offered a few months ago at this year's New Directors/ New Films festival in New York with the presentation of Pantelis Voulgaris' film, *THE ENGAGEMENT OF ANNA*. Voulgaris was born in Athens in 1940. After graduating from the Athens Academy of Film and Drama in 1961, he worked as assistant director on approximately twenty films. Since 1965, he has made two shorts, a documentary, and an experimental work based on the song cycle of Manos Hadjidakis (the composer of the music to *NEVER ON SUNDAY*) called *The Great Erotikos*. In February of 1974, Voulgaris was arrested by the fascist regime and sent to the concentration camp island of Yaros. He was released after the fall of the dictatorship in July of that year.

THE ENGAGEMENT OF ANNA is concerned with what are undoubtedly the two most important elements of the Greek social landscape: the relation of the lower classes to the middle class (especially the increasingly more uprooted peasantry in relation to the urban middle class) and the relation, in all its ramifications and variations, of the woman to her society. The “woman question” is undoubtedly the central focus of Voulgaris’ film. But the “woman question” as understood by Voulgaris and as it exists in Greece is of an entirely different dimension and takes on a completely different aspect from its Western European or U.S. counterpart. It is, relatively speaking, more brutal, more destructive, and in a literal sense, more Medieval in its nature and consequences. It is based not simply on social or economic inequality, but on a more profound national insecurity and emotional underdevelopment—an underdevelopment that Voulgaris portrays in all its shabbiness and tragedy.

The struggle for women’s rights in Greece today has very little in common with the advanced feminism of the Western countries; it is a struggle for simple human dignity, it is a rudimentary, fundamental struggle in defense of the integrity of the personality of every human being. It is not so much comparable to contemporary U.S. feminism as it is to the campaigns over a century ago to abolish slavery in the United States, or, more exactly, serfdom in Russia. It is, to put it simply, a movement still at the first stage of development, having to deal with a social condition that has not been known in the West—and here I include the Eastern European countries—for at least fifty years.

The Greece with which Voulgaris deals in THE ENGAGEMENT OF ANNA is a land where a forty-year-old peasant woman will look sixty-five from working in the tobacco fields ten to sixteen hours a day from the age of fifteen. It is a land where rather than waste food on a female child, twelve year old girls from poor families are literally indentured by their fathers to middle class households to act as servants and to be well or ill treated at the discretion of the “master” and “madam” of the house. It is a land where the word for child, “pedhi,” is still, especially in the countryside, applied only to male children, female children being called simply girls, “koritsia,” not children. It is a land where dowry remains a central element and consideration in the marriage relationship. “Proxenio,” which means the arrangement of a marriage (and is, by the way, the word in the title of Voulgaris’ film which has been unfortunately translated as “engagement”), is not simply a joke, but a bleak reality for the hundreds of thousands of women who come from the peasant and working classes and cannot afford anything but the most minimal of dowries or, more often than not, no dowry at all. This is the social landscape which Voulgaris sets out to survey. He does it in a manner that is nothing less than extraordinary.

The film opens with a panoramic shot, in soft focus, of the city of Athens as it awakens on a Sunday morning. In the background we hear the tolling of church bells. The camera then cuts to the courtyard of a church from the inside of which a young woman emerges; we follow her as she



goes home.

As soon as she reaches the house she goes to the kitchen and prepares the morning coffee for the household—we see that she is a servant. There is an enormous tension written on her face. She moves about mechanically, automatically, but with a sense of fear and with what, we will come to understand, is an extraordinary resignation.

It is a typical middle-class Athenian home. The men of the family are outside in the garden playing “tavli” (backgammon). The women, in another part of the garden, are chatting about one thing and another. It appears to be a family gathering. It appears that they have all come together to be witness to an unusual event, but not as participants so much as voyeurs. More members of the family join the congregation. One of them, a young man, brings along his new movie camera, indeed he never parts with it. He examines and plays with it to such an extent that it becomes obvious that it represents a new stage in his life, a new level of accomplishment and status. Finally, the subject of the gossip becomes less general and more specific, more uniform. The gathering begins talking about the servant woman, Anna. After a few minutes we finally understand why the entire family has assembled together. It is a “proxenio,” the arranging of a marriage. They are all here to see and judge the bridegroom who has been chosen, and to ensure that the first meeting between him and Anna is a “success.” The prospective bridegroom, Kosmas, arrives and is introduced to Anna. After being assaulted by indiscreet questions and embarrassing glances, they are allowed to leave and acquaint themselves with one another. Before they leave, however, Kosmas must promise the master of the house to have Anna back by ten o'clock.

Anna clearly understands the indignity of her position. She is embarrassed, tense, almost fearful. She reacts as any human being would to the violation of her most elemental right—the right to choose the person with whom she will share her personality and the free moments of her life. She does not speak to Kosmas, and answers his questions with only the most peremptory replies. But there is something else that frightens her. She is also clearly aware of the possibilities of the moment, of this forced encounter between her and this strange man. But she is afraid that she may not be able to deal with the demands that these next few hours will make on her. Her problem is that she is a virgin—in her early twenties, but still a virgin. And not simply in the physical sense—that is the least important of all—but in the more crucial sense of emotional virginity. This is literally her first time alone with a man. She has never kissed a man, never touched a man, never exchanged private words with a man before. She is of that class of poverty-ravaged women who, at the age of puberty, are “given away” to a strange household to be locked up there until the day they are “given” to a husband they have never met. And she knows that she is a part of that class and hates it, and hates herself and is profoundly ashamed of the incompleteness and denial of her life. She cannot talk to Kosmas, she cannot look him in the eyes because she is ashamed, and because she

feels that she is inadequate. She doesn't know how he will react to someone who has only been half a woman and half a human being, to someone who has never known even one moment of tenderness or love.

But Anna is a woman of immense inner strength, and Kosmas is a man of more than usual sensitivity, especially for a Greek male. Slowly, they move toward each other, exchanging each other's despair and dreams. Kosmas takes Anna to a cafe and then to a small, working class nightclub. She begins responding to him more and more. She smiles at him, touches him with affection, and kisses him goodnight with the passionate awareness that he has saved her from complete despair. This is the first time she has ever been allowed to enjoy herself as a woman. She is overcome by happiness. They want to see each other again. She has been fortunate in that her trial has turned into her triumph and beyond that, into her joy and self-fulfillment.

But she has returned home late—it is way past the time that was set as the limit to her evening. As she walks through the garden of the house, she is confronted by her master's mother, who has been waiting up for her all night, and now pounces on her with a calculated vengeance. Where has she been? She'll never change—give her a little bit of freedom and she becomes a tramp. And to think, the old lady has treated her so kindly, “almost” like her own daughter, and she is repaid with this massive betrayal, with this incredible disrespect and dishonor. But Anna can no longer keep still. She has kept her silence for years. But in the face of this final atrocity against her personality, she lashes out like a pent-up beast. She screams back at the old lady the truth of her condition with all the vengeance she can muster. She says that she has never been treated as a daughter, but rather as the constant and complete servant that she is. The conditions of her life have made her into a monster, she says, and this life of hers is nothing but a constant act of terror, an endless violation. Having spit out all her humiliation into the face of the old woman, Anna runs out and locks herself up in her room.

She refuses to come out. Finally she allows her master to come in and speak to her. His first question is, “What has he done to you?” She looks at him blankly, overwhelmed by the extent of his indiscretion. She replies, “Nothing.” Her master asks if Kosmas had touched her, had compromised her, had been dishonorable with her. He can't seem to understand that Kosmas is not the problem—that the problem is his own interference, his own indiscretion at the expense of Anna's dignity. He concludes by assuring Anna that he'll never allow Kosmas to go near her again, and by informing her that he has called her mother to come to Athens from her village.

Anna just stares at him blankly; her life is in the hands of others. She makes up her mind to leave—to leave all of this forever, definitively. It is the only solution left that will keep her from a life of self-hatred.

But her mother arrives and brings with her an inescapable realization. Anna is condemned to a dual oppression—she is a victim not only of her

sex, but of her class. She is representative of all those young women in Greece who are given over to a strange home because the families from which they come are so poor that the few resources at their disposal have to be carefully rationed. The male children who are grown have left the village to become laborers in the major cities, or more often than not, have emigrated to the Greek ghettos of West Germany, Australia, or the United States. After they leave, there is always one daughter (and many times more than one) who is given out as a servant both because she will be less of a strain on the family and because the little money she will earn in this fashion can be sent back to the village to supplement the family income. This is Anna's social position. Her mother, a quiet, almost invisible woman whose face is marked by the deprivation and defeat of her own life, comes to tell her that she should stay at least one more year. Her mother understands her—how could she not, in her gait and in the lines of her face we see Anna's tragedy anticipated. But if Anna could only be patient for one more year, her younger brother will be old enough to go out and start working. But now he is still too young—he needs Anna's support. In the end Anna decides to stay "one more year," but we know that it will be much longer. Anna represents yet another dead generation of Greek youth and Greek womanhood. She decides to accept her mother's fate—a life of resignation and self-hatred. She decides to condemn herself to oblivion. The film ends as it began, with a panoramic shot of Athens as it awakens to yet another day.

Voulgaris' film is a triumph of intelligence and compassion. It is at the same time a moving creation of individual tragedy, and a searing indictment of the social and economic structure that is its basis. Voulgaris has illuminated precisely the extent to which an individual's life is not in her own hands, but at the mercy of the entire cultural structure of which she is a part. Voulgaris is not at all interested in the portrayal of atomized individuals or acts and situations alienated from their roots and their environment. As a matter of fact, he does not believe that such atomization or alienation really exists. His concern is with human relations in all their multiplicity; and with the societal structure by which these relations are influenced, transformed, and even created. He is an artist concerned with subtleties and nuances, with all those seemingly insignificant suggestions that are at the core of human action.

And it is this sensibility that also explains his technique as a director. Every critic who has written on Voulgaris' film has commented on its tone. *THE ENGAGEMENT OF ANNA* is an extremely quiet film. It is almost silent as it moves from event to event with the same certainty and rhythm as the passing of time. Its tone is soft, placid, and inconspicuous. Despite its commitment, it is not a baldly accusatory film. It presents us with all the facts needed so that we may make a judgment. But its indignation is not a part of its method; it is a result of its solicitude and compassion. Though a profoundly revolutionary film, the key to its essential nature lies in its unassuming gentleness, in its demand that all judgments be made peacefully and with restraint, with a generous heart and an immense good will.

The one element that, more than any other, is responsible for the serenity of Voulgaris' film is the slowness of its pacing. Like DAYS OF 36, it is a film constructed on a passivity of motion. This unhurried pacing seems to be becoming the distinctive feature of the new Greek cinema. The only parallel really is to Antonioni -- but whereas the slowness of Antonioni's films is the result of existential lethargy, of the internal definition and condition of his characters' lives, the slowness of the new Greek films is external, environmental -- it is a product of the Greek landscape itself. Indeed, it appears to be a conscious attempt to ensure the integrity of the Greek film by placing it in its authentic environment, in the midst of its country's heat and slowness of life. In all its aspects, the contemporary Greek cinema is intensely committed to absolute fidelity to the reality of modern Greek experience. It will not compromise with that commitment. And perhaps because of its authenticity and integrity, it will be able to play a unique role in the cultural maturation of the country. It would be a role comparable, in its influence, significance and genius to that played by classical tragedy in Pericles' Athens -- no less a task than the reflection of a peoples spirit and the definition of their future.

#### POSTSCRIPT: The THIASOS Affair

A few days after writing this article I learned of what has already come to be known in Greece as the "THIASOS Affair." THIASOS (Theater Company) is the title of Theo Angelopoulos' new film. Upon completion it was immediately chosen by the Cannes festival as the official Greek entry. But when the film was screened for the Advisory Committee of the Greek Ministry of the Presidency (the Cabinet office that is the executive organ of the President) it was vetoed. Perhaps I should remind the reader that for a film to officially compete at Cannes, it must be sponsored by the government of the country it is to represent. The Advisory Committee decided against the film on the grounds that it "one-sidedly expresses the opinions of the extreme left."

The film deals with the period 1939-1952, in other words, from the Second World War and the Resistance through the Greek Civil War and the final triumph of the Right. It is almost four hours long. Other than the above I can make no critical judgment, as I have not seen the film. But others have made judgments and I would like to present them here.

1. Festivals: In an unprecedented move, the governing committee at Cannes changed its bylaws to allow THIASOS to be shown in competition, and it was subsequently awarded the International Critics Prize as Best Film; a Special Prize for THIASOS at Taormina; an entire day dedicated to THIASOS at La Rochelle; a four-day event dedicated to Angelopoulos at the Venice Bienalle where, along with his three feature films, three other Greek films are to be shown, among them THE ENGAGEMENT OF ANNA; and in addition, THIASOS was chosen for the festivals of Locarno, Berlin, London, Portugal, and Mexico.

2. Critics: *Cahiers du Cinéma* is to publish an interview with

Angelopoulos; *Positif* is to dedicate an entire issue to him. An Italian critic at Cannes wrote, "In 1947 we had the discovery of Rossellini. In 1960, Antonioni. In 1975, the discovery of Angelopoulos." The critic of the *Suddeutsche Zeitung*: "(THIASOS is) a film that for post-junta Greece will gain the importance of Eisenstein's *POTEMKIN* for revolutionary Russia and Rossellini's *OPEN CITY* for post-war Italy." The critic of the *Frankfurter Rundschau*: "(Angelopoulos) has proven that he is one of the greatest (directors) in Europe." The critic of the *Tage-Spiel*: "With every new film that Theodoros Angelopoulos makes it becomes increasingly clearer that there enters the history of the cinema a director that must be considered among the few great talents." He goes on to compare the director to Godard and Orson Welles. Penelope Houston, writing in *Sight and Sound*: "Without too much difficulty a line could be traced from Antonioni through Jancso in the work of Theodor Angelopoulos, fast emerging as the Greek director to watch." Richard Corliss, writing in *The Village Voice*: "Theo Angelopoulos' *ACTORS' TRAVELS* (sic) was one of the most important films at Cannes, if only for the political and stylistic trends it embodied."

In Greece meanwhile, the THIASOS affair has drowned the government in a tidal wave of protest from a disbelieving and disgusted public opinion. The question of THIASOS even reached the floor of Parliament.

As for Angelopoulos himself, he has kept a cool, if rightfully angry, perspective on the entire matter. In his words,

"With this manner the officials lost the opportunity of an alibi and threw away the mask of supposed progressivism. In the entire affair I am the only one who has profited. Or, if you want, it is the history of our land itself that has profited. Because it is frightful that the ruling class still does not admit that a civil war occurred in Greece."

Concerning his film, Angelopoulos says simply,

"I made a Marxist film ... It is a question of a film reflection on the history covering the period 1939-1952."

Now the only thing that remains is the film itself. Hopefully, it will come to the United States -- sooner, rather than later.

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Nashville and the American dream

by Michael Klein

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 6-7

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

"I was once a tool of oppression  
And as green as a sucker could be  
And monopolies banded together  
To beat a poor hayseed like me."  
-- Populist campaign song, 1890.

"Price of bread may worry some  
But it don't worry me ...  
Economy's depressed, not me ...  
And you may say I ain't free  
But it don't worry me."  
-- NASHVILLE, 1975.

The NYC house critics have been unanimous in their praise of NASHVILLE and in viewing it as a satire upon the grotesqueries of "middle America." Even Irwin Silber, writing in the Marxist weekly, *The Guardian*, has taken this tack in a review subtitled "country music unmasked." Silber praises the film for "capturing the mood of decay in America today," finds the roots of the country music in the film in "the backward consciousness of a Southern white populism," "a Ku Klux Klan mentality." Silber defines the film as a successful exposé of the business code of the country and western music industry, of "imperious superstars extolling the virtues of simplicity" and of "joyless sex (as) stepping stones to center stage or just rewards of stardom."

Rex Reed, writing in the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, also regards Altman's film as a satire, but finds it "vicious, malicious" and therefore anti-people:

"What emerges is a let's get the dumb slobbs out there in the silent majority and blame them for everything that's wrong with the country kind of movie."

From these and other reviews one would think NASHVILLE was

scripted by Terry Southern from a novel by Jacqueline Susann, and directed by John Huston. On the contrary, NASHVILLE may very well be one of the best U.S. films in the last twenty-five years. If so it is neither because it debunks the country and western music industry, nor solely as a result of its many scenes of acute satire.

NASHVILLE (in some respects like John Dos Passos' novel USA) is a non-linear narrative montage about the United States that takes a sympathetic view of the people as victims of commercial capitalist-induced cultural dislocation. As the people's roots in a semi-subsistence (agrarian/small business) capitalist society are destroyed by the march of monopoly and finance, they are further oppressed by inversions of humane personal values and idealized familial relations of the past.

Dos Passos symbolized this by having an advertising man pervert Emerson's "self-reliance" into a commercial for quack "self-medication." He portrayed the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti as a sacrifice "which would make the old words new," although at the end of the mass protest meetings the United States "stood defeated." Altman is similarly ambiguous: the people's need for the old communal values may be perverted by proto-fascist demagogues, especially as they (and Altman) have little sense of the class needs in society. However, their democratic ideals and a communal sense of endurance are strengths which the people still possess and which may contribute to renewal in the future.

Altman communicates his vision of change in the United States by a rhetorical style of reverse irony. The film begins as an acute and humorous satire of the surface reality of a decadent U.S. "empire" (Altman's term for the United States in "It don't worry me," the song that accompanies the opening credits). A cowboy singer records a song of praise to the tradition of General Patton and Vietnam. There is a multiple car crash on the freeway -- car crash as spectacle of commodity fetishism -- more effective than Godard's sequence in WEEKEND. The huge neo-classical building in the heart of Nashville that is a symbol of the Republic is revealed to be a fake; even the original was a hollow plaster of paris facade.

Altman's direction of the actors further contributes to the style of ironic Brechtian distance. Because the cast was allowed to write some of their own lines and to improvise, they tend to perform with an exaggerated realism that approaches symbolic stylization. This is especially notable in the crowd scenes in which many of the minor performers act with an intensity equal to that of the major figures in the foreground, producing images that are a mixture of documentary and cabaret.

However, as NASHVILLE progresses, the rhetorical parody often negates itself. The conventions and clichés of the commercial culture are revealed as a distortion of what in fact are legitimate human values and needs. Altman's main vehicle for this is a very precise counterpointing of the main characters. Although we tend to be dislocated by Altman's paratactic cutting from character to character and story to story, the method functions to convey the film's perspective. In general, figures of

integrity are counterpointed to figures who reflect the decadence of Nashville.

For example, a black restaurant worker is contrasted to a black performer who makes his way to success singing imitation country style music. In one scene the restaurant worker heckles, “the goo-goo man of the hour,” accusing him of cultural prostitution. Also, throughout the film he warns his white woman friend against the perils of the record industry she is trying to break into and comforts her after her star-climbing misadventures. Because of this, and because he comes across in simple human terms (that is neither as a liberal saint nor as a superfly avenger), the portrayal conveys a strong anti-racist statement.

Another example is the neglected wife of a local promotion man, a mother of two deaf mute children. She is counterpointed to a James Taylor sort of rock singer and three of his casual pickups -- the wife of his co-partner who is also a singer in the rock group; a groupie from California who flits around Nashville selfishly neglecting to visit a close relation who is dying of cancer in the hospital; and a jet set reporter from the BBC who is doing a documentary about superamerica and its fab celebrities.

Early in the film we witness a very moving scene in which the mother talks in sign language and half phrases with her mute children. Later in the film, in bed with the rock star who has composed a song “I’m Easy” especially for her (and another woman), she talks to him in sign-language, the language of her mute children, the most important source of love and giving in her life. A few minutes later he orders another mistress by telephone, while she dresses to return to a marriage that is both a trap and a source of meaning. Her plight echoes one of the songs sung earlier in the film (an example of the way that clichéd country and western music often refracts real situations):

“I can't leave my wife  
There are three reasons why  
Jimmy and Kathy and sweet Lorelei.”

It is significant that a line from one of the old style love lament songs —“It’s that careless disrespect”—negates the rock singer’s “I’m Easy” contemptuous treatment of women. It is sung by Barbara Jean, a farm girl who has become a star singer. She is the main representative of value in NASHVILLE, a factor that has been generally overlooked by the many critics who have praised Ronee Blakley’s performance and singing but have neglected to inquire into its meaning.

While Barbara Jean is the central figure in the film, and as such is set in relation to most of the other characters, two are placed in especially interesting counterpoint. The first is Connie White, her new rival who performs country ballads in the new sleek style. The second is a young cafeteria waitress who carefully attempts to copy Barbara Jean’s manner. However, she is a pathetic parody, for she sings not from Barbara Jean’s social and personal experience but merely from emulation and a desire



to find happiness by entering the star world of the modern American dream. We discover that there is a quality beyond technique that creates an affinity between the real singer and her audience—she reflects their experience and submerged longings.

Early in the film we view Barbara Jean's arrival at the Nashville airport. It is the sort of lyrical scene that Raoul Coutard excelled at: a long shot of an airplane landing, the main character emerges and walks swiftly across the screen. Only in NASHVILLE the image has depth and isn't planimetric: as the scene develops, another plane arrives in the background, at an angle to the first. Then the camera pulls back and situates her arrival within the social spectacle: Barbara Jean returns to Opryland after convalescing from a serious accident. However, in the middle of the hoopla and promotion, she collapses, a small figure in the midst of the crowd. The ostensible reason is strain, frailty of personality.

But it is more than this. She is class-split and culturally dislocated. A farmer's daughter has become a star, singing songs from her childhood culture. Her art, rooted in the values of an idealized agrarian society, is now archaically situated in a spectacle of commercial decadence. No wonder she cracks up.

“When I fell my life vanishing  
Like waves upon the sand,  
With nothing to replace it but invention,  
So I make my rhymes and sing my song,  
Still they don't understand.”

She stands on the stage interrupting her songs with tales about the past. It begins as conventional patter, but soon something is wrong. Barbara Jean stops singing and starts to talk about her grandmother's false teeth, and her Wizard of Oz childhood (the millennium somewhere over the rainbow). Nobody—the audience, the band, even Barbara Jean—understands what is taking place, although it has been prefigured in her songs. Her alienation is both a personal and a social tragedy.

“Momma and Daddy raised me with love and care,  
They sacrificed so that I could have a better share,  
They fed me and nursed me  
And sent me to school,  
Momma taught me how to sing  
Daddy lived the golden rule ...”

She sings not only of a lost past but of a past that has been idealized, and as such represents a utopian wish for something better than the present social system and culture. It is true that neither Barbara Jean nor Altman makes as explicit a dialectical connection between the old collective familial values and future social change as, for example George Jackson did in the prison letters that were written to his father.

“No one believes me when I tell them you never went to a  
night club or finger poppers party during the twenty years

that I remember. I don't think any man in the U.S. would have reacted as you did concerning that incident with the Hudson car, fixing it with your hands and driving it for five years in that condition ... I think I see the larger historical concept in its full detail. The obligation you felt toward us I feel toward history.” -- *Soledad Brother*, p. 98.

However, it is this need for social connection to which Barbara Jean's alienated, atomized audience responds, however mystified and idealist the expression. The source of her great popularity, and of the music the film reflects in other scenes, is expression of contemporary pain and projection of a familiar utopian ideal in common terms:

“And I know there must be something someplace  
and some way to live  
So just help me keep from sliding down some  
more.”

In the final scene of the film, Barbara Jean is shot by an assassin who was awaiting the arrival of the candidate at a concert at which she is appearing. As the crowd is at the point of panic, one of the minor characters in the film, a figure out of *God's Little Acre* who has come to Nashville in quest of stardom, walks onto the stage and begins to sing. The crowd joins in and disorder is averted.

On the one hand the ritual-like death of Barbara Jean is not in any immediate sense a scene of renewal. The song that is sung—“It don't bother me”—is a far cry from either the utopian laments of contemporary country music, or the Populist radical ballads of a preceding generation. On the surface level it is bleak satire: passive acceptance of economic exploitation and cultural oppression, an ironic hymn to a spurious sense of individual freedom—an atomized internalization of the U.S. empire. As the camera cranes back we see that both the people and the business elements behind the proto-fascist campaign have joined in the song.

“Cause in my empire life is sweet ...  
And life may be a one way street  
But it don't worry me.”

One aspect of the final image (perhaps primary) points sadly toward present dangers of incipient fascism. However, the intensity of the final scene arises from the interplay of this sense of immolation with another quality. When Barbara Jean is shot, her co-singer Haven Hamilton is wounded. Nevertheless he rises to the occasion, calls to the crowd to keep calm and asks for a song. Suddenly a person we have caught a glimpse of trying to escape from a dirt farm life comes out of the wings and a new folk star is born, all tears and torn stockings. As she sings, the camera pans bringing many of the characters of the film into spatial connection. The song is taken up by a black gospel choir, and soon the whole community joins in.

When she breaks off singing to say, “Dead people is free from pain, y'know,” we respond with compassion. For “It don't worry me” isn't sung lightly and ironically as it was over the credits at the start of the film. It is now sung with pathos in blues style as a sad acknowledgement of social problems and personal pain, as well as an attempt by denial to escape from the fear and the pain. As the people in the crowd join in, a potential source of strength is revealed in opposition to the surface words of the song. There is a possibility that the hopes, ideals and resources of the people that are being corrupted by present society might be a harbinger of the future. We are left with the contradiction, and also with a renewed sense that the needs of the people may only be truly fulfilled by negation of the social system that has (in Marx's words) “torn asunder” human connections and values.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

### Buying Nashville

by Steven Abrahams

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 6-7

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

There is so much “information” about characters and lifestyles in Robert Altman’s new film, NASHVILLE, that the temptation is to accept the film only on its own most apparent terms—as brief descriptive fragments of a larger system which is never made manifest. With most films, that system is largely identifiable with the politics of studio, producer, director, and screenwriter, or some combination thereof. With Altman’s films, however, determining critical perspective is complicated by the fact that his material often remains on the level of its characters. It rarely rises to the level of statement, where ideology is more apparent. Certain earlier Altman films ease this dilemma by functioning as parody (BREWSTER McCLOUD) or as descriptions of marginal subcultures (CALIFORNIA SPLIT). NASHVILLE, though, does not simply parody its subject, and its concerns can hardly be dismissed as marginal. The questions to which the film points—the nature of popular art, the relation of culture to politics, and that of performer to audience—are vital for critics of popular culture. These concerns require that this film be pieced back together so that Altman’s work may be politically evaluated with respect to both form and content.

Altman’s statement in NASHVILLE is complicated by the formal structure of the film, his much-acclaimed development of twenty-four characters through overlapping subplots. The potential advantages in challenging traditional film narrative are numerous. This multi-character structure—by eliminating a focus on two or three main characters—facilitates presenting reality as interpretive, conflicting experiences. As in Marcel Ophuls’ THE SORROW AND THE PITY, this structure can highlight the political context of an historical moment by presenting many interpretations in conflict with one another. The difficulty with NASHVILLE is that Altman’s commitment is neither to social documentation nor to melodramatic contrivance. The film’s structure allows for an unevenness in which characterizations range from believable, sympathetic portrayals to broad caricatures (such as Geraldine Chaplin’s Opal from the BBC). In thus allowing actors and actresses some measure of control in interpreting their characters, Altman’s process taps new sources of creativity, at the same time as it

obscures the film's overall intentions. Are we meant to see the characters in relation to their roles in the world of music and politics, or do we cheer the performers? Clearly Altman tries for both goals, but he's ultimately more committed to entertainment than to analysis.

The film's opening sequence presents all the characters as products for our consumption (a mocking advertisement for the film) and the recording session with Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson). These images give insight into the theme of art as product. Increasingly, though, the film builds on melodrama, which encourages identifying with the characters and perceiving their music as personal expression. This conflict—between art as product and art as personal expression—is a focal one for mass culture, both film and music. NASHVILLE attempts to give some analysis of the culture and also to cash in on the audience's tendency to love the performers and to buy their art.

In the film's final scene, we are swayed from one emotion to another—from the triumphant performance of Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakely) to the assassination and finally to the charismatic rendition of "It Don't Worry Me." The final triumph over adversity is an emotional catharsis for the audience, and all insight into this politically loaded situation is drowned in the emotion. Those final moments of NASHVILLE provide important clues about Altman's priorities and his ideas about art and politics.

For Altman, the successful performer is one who, through the performance, transcends the moment's concreteness, such as personal problems and distance from audience. The music which results may be a song about everyday, ordinary reality (as in most country and western music). But, it is important to recognize that it is a song *about* the everyday, sung by a star who is performing for an audience. In NASHVILLE, the real stars make these transformations so effortlessly that we accept them as people singing about their lives. Barbara Jean sings from her soul, and her music inspires love and hate as if she were truly intimate with her fans. She falls apart *between* songs—when her emotional problems overwhelm her, and the audience loses sympathy for her. The character of Tom (Keith Carradine) on- and off-stage reflects this same definition of the successful performer. We are clued as to how he uses his music for purposes of seduction, as something he creates (a product) for selfish gain. Nevertheless, in his nightclub performance of "I'm Easy, he becomes transformed into a man singing a love song to a woman who has come to see him. Finally, when Albuquerque (Barbara Harris) sings "It Don't Worry Me," we know she is destined to be the new star. She is transformed from a frazzled, inarticulate runaway wife into a performer who comes to life and makes personal contact with the audience.

The issue is not whether performers do, in fact, make personal contact with their audience and sing songs (or act parts) which draw on personal experience. Of course they do, and part of a successful (non-Brechtian) performance is built on the illusion of personal contact

between artist and audience. But that aspect of art, the personal expression, is only a half-truth, especially regarding mass cultural forms like country music and the narrative film. The other truth, the larger truth, defines art also as a commodity. NASHVILLE's complexity and confusion stem from the fact that Altman has glimpsed but shied away from this larger truth. If we ultimately perceive the film's stars as struggling individuals, we lose the focus on the structure of the Nashville music industry. Such ambivalence has certain parallels with Altman's position as a filmmaker.

Altman is a relatively independent filmmaker whose films (other than M.A.S.H.) have not had great financial success. Altman is treated critically as an artist with minimal commercial concerns. NASHVILLE, though, is a turning point, especially considering the film's elaborate plan of distribution (prime coverage in major magazines, concurrent sound track sales) and the future film projects which Altman has lined up (with the financial backing of omb de Laurentis). Likewise, country and western music is making important changes from its mythic definition as the undiluted expression of the common man to a recognition of the growth of the Nashville music industry. In fact, there has always been a powerful commercial aspect to the music of Nashville. WSM (the radio station which broadcasts the Grand Ole Opry to millions of listeners) stands for "We Shield Millions" and has been a profitable enterprise for the National Life and Accident Insurance Company. The new Opryland, which is seen in Altman's film, is a \$40 million complex with television facilities. It reflects the gloss and sophistication which accompanies the industry's phenomenal growth. The danger for the audience is the perception of this art, whether Altman's films or Nashville's music, as somehow transcendent over commercial facts, as art which is not a commodity. The film NASHVILLE begins to deal explicitly with the economic context of its characters. But it ultimately reinforces popular myths about performers as apolitical, noncommercial artists.

In relation to the politics of the performers in his film, Altman is aware of the artist's classic denial of interest in politics:

Lady Pearl: "We never let Haven Hamilton take sides politically."

Bill: "I don't care about politics."

Tom: "I don't vote for nobody for President."

Barnet: "No politics. No governments. No nothing."

By situating these comments in a Presidential campaign which draws these performers into participation, Altman presents these denials as myopic and ineffectual. Yet beyond seeing through the characters' protests, the film audience never sees the political campaign's broad reality either. The candidate, Hal Phillip Walker, is never seen. Rather, he is heard presenting his platform through campaign vans to non-listening drivers and pedestrians. The campaign is essentially populist in nature, full of appeals to the common man's sense of frustration with the

system of taxes, manipulation by lawyers, rising prices, and even the meaninglessness of the National Anthem. John Triplette (Michael Murphy), the front man for the candidate, sells his man to everyone as if it were not a question of politics, just good common sense and show-business acumen. If Walker is a candidate modeled after George Wallace, Altman has avoided presenting the “harder” issues of racism and foreign policy. We, too, are forced into a kind of myopia in which fragments of common sense are substituted for issues. The final political rally is just another concert with the hint of something larger in the ominous black limousines and the huge, billowing U.S. flag.

The politics of NASHVILLE are, finally, discernable in the film’s formal structure. With twenty-four characters, a variety of sub-plots, and multiple sound tracks, Altman situates the viewer in a complex world, seemingly without a coherent political perspective. We must locate the film’s politics both in this absence of a broad political analysis and in the presented level of the text. On the level of the text itself, Altman presents a commercial art which is more self-expressive than product related and a political campaign which is more commonsensical than issue-oriented. Because there is no consistent attempt at parody or analysis, NASHVILLE leaves us on an experiential level where myths and half-truths about popular culture are reinforced rather than systematically challenged.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

### *Dead Pigeon on Beethoven Street* Fuller's passionate anarchism

by Ernest Larsen

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, p. 8

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

Sam Fuller's most recent film, DEAD PIGEON ON BEETHOVEN STREET, nominally a detective film, has not been very widely released, but wherever it surfaces, it's worth taking pains to see it. Two of the most recent detective films, CHINATOWN and THE LONG GOODBYE, conceal within a more-or-less politicized plotline an attitude toward contemporary society which it might be appealing to call nihilistic (if one were to recall the Russian rather than the Latin roots of this word). But to be accurate, it must be described as passively despairing. To the contrary, DEAD PIGEON is truly destructive. By that I mean it takes an aggressive not reflective stance toward the organization of society. With extraordinary energy and some naiveté, Fuller sees all forms of social control as paper tigers. To that extent, DEAD PIGEON is liberating, even if it is still held in bondage to an ideology which in its full-blown form is not, as with the scenarists and directors of the other two films, fashionably liberal, but fascistic.

Fuller, as a devotee of Hobbesian dog-eat-dog-ism, is repellent, an example of all that is most decidedly macho in Western culture. But Fuller as passionate anarchist, as destroyer of all the cozy taboos of U.S. society (see THE NAKED KISS, SHOCK CORRIDOR, and UNDERWORLD U.S.A.) exists almost alone among Hollywood directors with a perception of the direct line that runs from the personal to the social. (It must be remembered, for example, that Fuller gave Bogdanovich the idea for TARGETS.) In accordance with this deep contradiction, DEAD PIGEON is as schizophrenic as U.S. society itself. But the movie is a relief because it treats its subject, a worldwide political blackmailing scheme being investigated in Europe by an U.S. detective, as ferociously ludicrous. It takes real perversity to stage a gunfight, as Fuller does, over the heads of sweet innocent babies, with bullets flying in a maternity ward.

Unlike the heroes of CHINATOWN and THE LONG GOODBYE who merely sport the veneer of cynicism, DEAD PIGEON's detective hero,



played by Gary Lockwood with offensive stolidity, is almost without moral stature. He forfeits our sympathy early on by drugging and entrapping with a phony sex photo a female member of the blackmailing ring. He soon makes his way into the gang as an expert blackmailer. Shades of morality classically maintained in all detective films (and novels) between the detective and bad guys are here smudged beyond recognition. In the plot development, we see one diplomat after another entrapped by Lockwood and the female gang member—while they gradually fall in love, as if they were living in an idyll. True to Fuller's mangled classicism, Lockwood eventually kills her and the movie ends where it began on Beethoven St., apparently the last ditch of the European graveyard.

Fuller's conscious manipulation of bourgeois representational techniques constitutes a critique of those techniques—both in content and in form. For example, at the end of the film, the hero confronts the ringleader who happens to be a fencing master in his office, the walls of which are lined with foils and swords. The spectator of the bourgeois entertainment has a right to expect chills and spills. Furthermore, anyone who's seen a Fuller film knows that he's better at staging action sequences than almost any Hollywood director. But Fuller denies his audience the romantic or sadomasochistic pleasure of the fight. Instead the two men engage in a grueling duel which soon veers off into the bizarre as the detective hurls one sword after another at the ringleader without killing him. Nearly bereft of psychological realism, this scene instead explores another reality: a reality in which fear and death are not theatrical conventions to be exploited for our edification.

Another example. Fuller sets up a series of equivalencies in which, first, the hero is made to engage in precisely the same corrupt activity as the blackmailers, the sex-photo scheme. Then, the politicians who are the blackmail victims all in one way or another acquiesce to the supposed immorality of the scheme. (With typical Fullerian nasty proto-anarchism, the politicians include an U.S. Senator who just happens to resemble Ted Kennedy, an African diplomat who wishes to uphold his dignity, a Communist Chinese diplomat who is entranced by Western hardware, and a French diplomat who is delighted by the blackmail with the expectation that it should enhance his image.) The cartoon treatment of these equivalencies reveals a similar set of equivalencies of the level of ideas between sex, politics, and money. The characters are not recognizable as people but as mediums of exchange, and they attain the status of commodities in Fuller's use of rapid plotting.

Uniting these equivalencies is the consistent implicit and explicit prominence of voyeurism as an aspect of the behavior of all the characters, whether blackmailed or blackmailer. What has really been detailed in this tawdry, inconsistent and unbelievable plot (values unacceptable in good bourgeois art) is the mechanism of passivity in which all are implicated by the camera, both the blackmail camera and Fuller's camera. The repetition of the blackmail allows that mechanism to be detailed since the act in question throughout, the act of sex, is

never performed.

One sequence has the hero watching Hawks' RIO BRAVO dubbed in German in a German theater—meanwhile we, the U.S. audience, are watching an U.S. film made in Germany. Even aside from the ironies of cultural dissolution, the ironies of this simple—even simpleminded—comic situation are enormous. Fuller, with his unerringly insane insight, is perfecting a critique. He reveals that as passive participants in the spectacle we could eventually be led to watching ourselves watch ourselves, a deadly reconciliation of total isolation with total social integration. The limiting factor of this critique is his extreme individualism in which all human combinations are seen as forms of blackmail.

Fuller is usually designated by auteurists as visually potent but intellectually under-equipped. His ideas are in fact very simple, as with all ideologues. But as I have hoped to demonstrate relations between those ideas are far from simple; not far, in fact, from situationist theory. The test of consciousness is coherence, either articulated or in action. Fuller does have a trashy mind, but any less resourceful director would have been impressed enough by the resources of the bourgeois art product to learn to make a wholly convincing work of art. Instead his films increasingly suggest that they are only films and don't attempt to live up to the Hollywood standard—either the acting is bad or the dialogue is cliché-ridden or both. In DEAD PIGEON, Fuller's wife, Christa Lang, plays her semi-conventional prostitute's role with exquisite self-mockery. It's the kind which intimates too much respect for the nuances of daily (real) life to allow the audience to be taken in by mere acting. As an example of Fuller's playful approach to the demands of convention, when Lockwood asks Lang why she became a prostitute and blackmailer, Fuller doesn't bother to supply heavy motivation or even believable motivation. Instead Lang says, "I always wanted to act." Similarly, when as bourgeois plot-convention demands, the detective and the bad girl must (appear to) fall in love, the scene as Fuller allows it to happen is patently ludicrous. The pair can barely pretend interest in each other, let alone commit that Hollywood exercise in treachery.

In this film, perhaps with less intensity, but with as much specificity as in several earlier films, Fuller is able to provide a denunciation of the mechanics of illusion that blackmail the spectator into accepting the exciting or merely pleasant nonsense that flickers across the flat surface of the screen.

### *Women's Happytime Commune* New departures in women's films

by E. Ann Kaplan

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 9-11

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

A study of Sheila Paige's *WOMEN'S HAPPYTIME COMMUNE* provides an opportunity to survey the kinds of films women have been making since the resurgence of the women's movement in the late 60s. People are now ready for analysis of the practical, theoretical and methodological problems of making feminist films and of developing a concept of feminist cinema. As a contribution to discussion about women's films and in order to place Paige's film in its proper context, I will explore the various sorts of movies women have made and analyze the assumptions underlying their work.

The present women's movement is unique historically in the emphasis that has been placed on women's art and women's culture generally. Interest in films by and about women began in 1969 as part of the larger focus on women's creative activity, and on analysis of women in art and specifically in the media. The reasons for this emphasis need thorough analysis, but probably they have to do with the forms the women's movement took in general, particularly consciousness raising with its emphasis on personal expression, and with the influence of the 60s counterculture.

The same reasons that lead to the interest in women's art may in part account for the form that has predominated in women's films. Nearly all are what we may loosely call cinema vérité.<sup>(1)</sup> Subjects are selected and then, sometimes with prompting from interviewers off camera, talk about their experience, looking directly at the camera or speaking as they about tasks in their home or work. Camera work, sound and editing are aimed at rendering everything in as realistic a light as possible. Cameras are set up in people's homes or in their local communities so that we get the feeling of the natural environment. Sometimes the sound track from an interview is played over shots of the women going about their tasks: occasionally, there is a commentary by the filmmakers as voice over. The basic form is women describing their personal experiences, their conflicts (both growing up and in their daily lives) and

their understanding of how their situation all came about (JANIE'S JANIE, GROWING UP FEMALE, THE WOMEN'S FILM).

In this form, the filmmaker is in the background. Obviously, her perspective enters in the selection of subjects in the first place (i.e., middle class or working class women, politically involved women or non-political women, women with conflicts between work and home/ children, those with conflicts in marriage/ love, those with specific identity problems or organizing other women whose main struggle is around women), and in the editing of her material. The selection of what to show, out of all the possible aspects of any woman's life, is determined by the film's overall purpose as the director conceives it. Women who are political, in the sense of having a class analysis of society and believing that organizing working women is a strategy for social change, view their films as propaganda or organizing tools. They hope to raise the consciousness of middle class women seeing films about working women, and to show working women, hesitant about joining a struggle, images of the possibilities for change. Geri Ashur's JANIE'S JANIE is a good example of this kind of film. Made in the Ironbound district of Newark, the film focuses on the personal history of Janie and the way that she came to see the need for organizing against a system that oppressed her at every turn—because she was poor, divorced and a woman. The analysis of women's oppression in capitalism all comes from Janie herself, although one has a sense of her involvement in the larger working class project in the Ironbound district in the sometimes too pat explanations that she gives (the project is not referred to explicitly in the film). Newsreel's THE WOMEN'S FILM, Madeline Anderson's I AM SOMEBODY (about a hospital workers' strike), and ANGELA: LIKE IT IS would all fall into the same category of explicitly political films in the cinema verité style.

Women who come to the feminist movement from a position other than a class analysis of society in the traditional sense, select middle class women like themselves (their friends as in Kate Millet's THREE LIVES and the Twin City Media Collective's CONTINUOUS WOMAN)(2) or make films of their own struggles (e.g., HOME MOVIE, JOYCE AT 34, MAMA, MOM AND ME).(3) The focus is on the particular conflicts these women faced, whatever they might be. The underlying assumption is that the conflicts are part of the way society views women, the roles society forces on women, the difficulty for women to be fulfilled in this kind of society with its particular ideas of the nuclear family and the subordinate position of women. The directors of these films differ from those of the first group in that they do not see their films as "organizing tools." They certainly want to speak to women with similar conflicts and problems, to show them that they are not alone in their struggles, give them the courage to combat their sense of inferiority and find fulfillment. But their main end is description rather than evoking feelings of solidarity for social change.

Both groups of films serve important although differing functions, and reflect in their diversity of orientation as well as in their similarity of

form the stage of the women's movement over the past four years. All the films, in varying degrees, function as alternative or counter-cinema, both in terms of the economic base and of formal intervention. To begin with the economic base: the movies' form is partly conditioned by the exclusion of women from commercial filmmaking and from learning the skills required in film production. Women have set up film collectives, where the few women who already have the skills teach others who would otherwise have no opportunity to learn them. Films are often collectively made, with all the compromises and time delays that this method of working involves. Women's movies are thus often as valuable in terms of the process of making them as for the products that result. Their sometimes non-professional aspect follows from the conditions of their production.

In addition, women's movies fall outside the commercial network of movie making. Since their themes are, in terms of mass audience, not popular, women cannot get funding for their work. For the same reasons, the films cannot be shown in the regular circuits. The cinema verité style is appropriate for these conditions. It is a relatively cheap form of filmmaking, requiring minimum equipment, no sets, no actors, and a small crew who are not paid, but volunteer their services out of commitment to the cause.

The form is also a result of a deliberate attempt at cinematic intervention. Firstly, showing real women on the screen is, itself, revolutionary, conditioned as we are to the idealized, fantasy images of the commercial cinema. (One could argue that this kind of intervention is more radical in a film like JANIE'S JANIE than in JOYCE AT 34, since Janie goes against all our media images of women in her style of living and goals in life. Joyce and her husband in both looks, goals, attitudes and values are thoroughly bourgeois, albeit that their attempt at a new domestic situation does involve struggle with the conventional idea of the nuclear family.)<sup>(4)</sup>

Secondly, the kind of documentary women are making is the antithesis of those awful "educational" films people saw in high school, where a condescending narrator takes us through a pattern where the teenager does something "wrong" (i.e., against the social norms), and gradually "reformed" (i.e., made to conform to expected behavior). In the cinema verité films, the women speak for themselves, out of their own experience, without the mediation of commercial interests or patriarchal ideology.

British feminist filmmakers view intervention rather differently. Intervention to them means interrogating the whole notion of realism in the cinema. They do not believe that one can

"actually apprehend the message ... in some direct way. This idea is what we're deliberately trying to work against."<sup>(5)</sup>

They consider cinema verité films to encourage passivity and to have little effect on audiences. Such films "don't do any work in terms of

presenting ideas or actually engaging with the audience at any level.” They are interested in moving in the direction of entertainment films of a Brechtian kind, believing that “the idea that entertainment and politics don't go together is absurd.”(6) Claire Johnston claims that “the ‘truth’ of our oppression cannot be ‘captured’ on celluloid with the ‘innocence’ of the camera.”(7) She calls cinema verite or documentary films “the cinema of non-intervention,” and argues that they are dangerous because they “promote a passive subjectivity at the expense of analysis.”(8) In a strong statement, Claire Johnston asserts,

“Any revolutionary must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss oppression of women within the text of the film: the language of the cinema/ depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected.”(9)

In their later critical essays on Raoul Walsh and Dorothy Arzner, (10) Johnston and Pam Cook have tried to develop a critical methodology for showing how women have been treated within patriarchal Hollywood cinema. The London Women’s Film Group (to which Johnston belongs) have attempted in their film, THE AMAZING EQUAL PAY SHOW to raise the problem of realism within the film itself and to show the processes by which women are manipulated into doing what is against their interests in capitalism. They reworked a very Brechtian script written and performed before by a theater group, and see their decision to use it as significant. The script is

“based on notions of an epic theater and is an extraordinarily didactic parody of male chauvinist notions in unions and male chauvinism in the media.”(11)

The position of the British group reflects basic characteristics of a radical (and minority) element in British political and intellectual life, which in turn have affected the form and style of the British women’s movement. The influences include British leftist thinking about culture, and recently certain strands in French, German and Russian intellectual life—in France, Roland Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, the *Cahiers du cinéma* group, and, in terms of film practice, the recent Godard; in Germany, Brecht; and in Russia the formalists, particularly Todorov and Shlovsky. There is in addition a strong Freudian influence, especially as Freud has been re-interpreted by a French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, whose work has been propagated in England by Anthony Wilden. In a similar way, the form and style of U.S. women’s films reflect U.S. intellectual and political traditions that influenced the shape of the women’s movement here. British feminists tend to be organized into small, sectarian groups, each with a closely reasoned political position that is linked to leftist traditions in England that existed long before the women’s movement. As Juliet Mitchell has shown,(12) the U.S. women’s movement was strongly influenced by the student and black movements of the 60s and by the trends of the counterculture.

The consciousness raising structure that was so widespread here



dramatically influenced the U.S. struggle to integrate personal lives with political beliefs. This stress on “the personal is political” led to a redefinition of politics, rendering the traditional leftist categories and systems inadequate. When women talk about their oppression and personal conflicts, they are, from a U.S. point of view, discussing issues with implicit political implications and dimensions. U.S. women tried to generate their politics out of their personal experience. There is, thus, emphasis on personal reality in our films, in contrast to taking an already defined political form—Marxism, Maoism, various forms of socialism—and giving these systems a feminist dimension. This is one reason why the U.S. movement and most of the women’s films here have dealt with middle class rather than working class women. Since the movement was a middle class phenomenon to begin with, and since women were beginning with themselves, the middle class became the focus. In Europe, where women’s movements took place within defined leftist groups, working class women were generally focused on both in actions and in movies.(13)

Both approaches to filmmaking and to developing a women’s movement have their advantages and disadvantages. One danger of the U.S. cinema verité movies is that they only speak to the already committed. Working class women are often not moved by films that detail lives they know only too well, and they respond more to a film like Francine Winham’s *PUT YOURSELF IN MY PLACE*, which is a comic parody of sex roles. But the cinema verité films have been useful in the classroom. Students are often moved by learning about the plight of working class women whose lives they have never really tried to imagine. The cinema verité films about middle class women provoke lively discussion about issues that middle class students face in their futures, particularly in relation to marriage, family and careers. The abstract avant-garde or experimental films like *PENTHESILEA* often leave students confused, despite the works’ value as new departures in filmmaking and as confronting basic aspects of cinema that are important for women (e.g., voyeurism, identification). It remains to be seen what response films like *THE AMAZING EQUAL PAY SHOW*, Michelle Citron’s *SELF-DEFENSE* and the Berwick Collective’s *CLEANING WOMEN*, which combine avant-garde and innovative attitudes to cinema with a specifically political orientation, will evoke. What is certainly true is that we need ways of reaching women heavily saturated with mass media plots, styles, values and images, to the extent that they have accepted this pseudo-reality as “public and official ‘reality.’”(14)

With this background, we are ready to look at Sheila Paige’s *WOMEN'S HAPPYTIME COMMUNE*. Her film belongs in none of the categories so far outlined. It is not cinema verité of either the explicitly or implicitly political kind; nor is it an abstract or art film in the style of Maya Deren, Laura Mulvey, Susan Stockman or Mildred Iatrou. In being non-naturalist and non-abstract, Paige’s film marks a new departure in women’s films.(15) While it draws on elements common to the movies described so far, it makes something unique out of them.

Some information about the conditions of the film's making and of Paige's aims in doing the film may be useful before going on to a more thorough analysis.<sup>(16)</sup> The film was shot in Virginia in four days, with women who had not all worked together before. This fact of their not being a group who knew each other meant that a number of deep conflicts emerged while the film was being made. Since there was only time and money for the four days' shooting, Paige had to work with what she had when she returned to New York. The discontinuous material shot with one camera was very difficult to edit and took some time. From this distance, the film looks flawed to Paige. In a class discussion of her film, she commented that she would have scripted such more of WOMEN'S HAPPYTIME COMMUNE had she to do it over again.

As it was, she started out merely with the idea of doing a women's Western. She was attracted to the genre because of the use of wide open spaces and because the Western, as a genre, excludes women from the action (to all intents and purposes, anyway). Having stated that she wanted to make a Western, Paige let the actors (who were friends or women people involved knew) create the film. Drawing on her teaching experience, where she had had success getting children to think through their personal "stories," Paige wanted to allow women to enact dreams and fantasies that interested them. The idea of the commune was the contribution of one actress, Roberta Nodes. Paige knew most of the stories, although one woman kept hers secret until the very end.

This sort of structure is a dramatic departure from the usual narrative film where the story is laid down from the start in its entirety. It is an improvisational fantasy. It takes the shape it has, presents what it does, as a result of the people Paige was working with. Its basic theme, as Paige sees it, is discussion around the proposition of women living in a commune, with the result being that most do not want to live this way. Possibly, Paige says, the film has the practical problem of proposing something no one wants to do. Basically, Paige was simply excited about what people had to say. She apparently played it by ear a lot of the time. Some scenes were worked on and scripted (e.g., Roberta's dreams of the future), while others were quite spontaneous.

The main problem of the film and of this way of working, according to Paige, is that the film lacks a clear framework. While audiences (students, women's groups, people at film conferences) now quite like the film (this was not true earlier when the issues the film raises were still very sensitive ones), people often do not know what to make of certain scenes. For instance, there is one scene, in a woman's fantasy, where she is seen going crazy. People don't know how to evaluate this, how to judge it, because it is not placed in any perspective within the film itself. Paige evidently would have liked the film to have a more clear point of view.

Paige's comments about her film go some way toward explaining the special kind of quality it has. Her interest in what women have to say and in their fantasies reflects a broad kind of tolerance and acceptance



that is refreshing. An open, humorous attitude prevails. Whether consciously or not, the people in the film, and Paige, in her excellent editing, parody basic sexist institutions in our culture as well as stock, familiar, male/female stereotypes and classic situations in the Western film genre. There is also a tolerant, accepting laughter at aspects of the women's movement itself.

The gentle ironic tone of most of the movie is set in the opening sequence which is a marvelous parody of a church service and of typical religiosity, complete with the sexism that entails. The credits emerge over a middle distance shot of a pink brick church on bright green grass. It looks like one from a fairy tale, with its black shutters and white door. Prudence's daughter, Marilyn Landers, comes skipping into the frame, the folk music on the track undercutting the religious context. She has a saucy, impudent skip, moving arbitrarily from side to side. Dissolve to a minister, a woman in clerical robes, leading a group in singing "Nearer My God to Thee." The comedy of the woman minister (later the cowboy) is reinforced by the close-up shots of the congregation, all women, a mixture of strange faces in odd disguises. The shots of people continue as the minister reads a selection from the Bible about women's inferior status. Her words are undercut by shots of a lady asleep, of Marilyn's saucy, impish looks, with the camera panning over the group to rest on a huge bonnet. Then Roberta Nodes, mocking the proper stance of people at a funeral, gets up to say a few words mourning the death of Hannah Prudence and bemoaning the departure of Hannah's daughter, Marilyn "leaving where her mother was born and bred."

This scene nicely establishes a conventional community's set of values and attitudes, the old world, as it were, that Marilyn and many women in the film will be seen breaking away from or struggling with. Although the perspective is a comic one, the viewer understands only too well the reality of the conventional forms being mocked. The camera now cuts to a longshot of a boat with two women in it, pulling lazily away from the shore, drifting off down the river with soft dulcimer music on the track. The image is peaceful, rural and conveys feelings of freedom and carefreeness.

Cut to a close-up shot of a woman in black feathers (Frances Cima) leaning on her side, talking about this being the real West, the real life. We understand that the two women in the boat have met up with her, and that she is telling them her story. Her black clothes and feathers symbolize mourning, but also have night-club connotations that contrast with the content of her tale. The clothes reflect a despair and a giving up. She is apparently weary, feeling that her business on earth is done.

This next sequence, through the woman's story, follows the parody of religious institutions with a comment on marriage. It is rather hard to gauge the woman's own attitude to her story, although the underlying intensity with which it is told reveals real pain and the woman's narrative style is so vivid that one enters the tale completely. She tells of

conventional marital feelings (being married to her husband felt like being married to God), her feeling that the idea of going to a retreat was like a second honeymoon, and of her terrible disillusionment there. Symbolically, of course, the tale of hideous mistreatment by the alcoholic husband-priest, complete with the beating of the woman and murder of the child, is true for the woman telling it. Yet, at the end, when her listeners question her, she declares she doesn't hate all men—just this particular one. The camera work in this sequence underscores its essential seriousness, the face being in close up all the time. Women's vulnerability and suffering is here dramatized excellently.

Cut to a contrasting scene of a large woman (Judy March) in bonnet and bright red skirt, feeding chickens in a sunlit yard by a huge barn. Her clothes symbolize traditional virginal womanhood and provide a striking contrast to the woman in black. It is amazing how Paige has managed to make thematic connections between narratively completely discontinuous scenes. The repressive and hypocritical aspects of religion, introduced in the opening scene, were echoed in the second scene with the feathered woman, along with the introduction of a second theme—the repressive aspects of conventional marriage. The chicken lady, in the third sequence—it's what everyone does, what a dutiful daughter should do. Meanwhile, she is dutifully taking care of her mother and father, and feeding the chickens, despite her utter boredom with her life.

All this is elicited through a conversation the chicken lady has with Roberta, who now comes down from the hills, complete with cowboy hat, gun and breeches (symbolizing independence) trying to find women to join her in a women's commune. This theme of the commune, once introduced, provides the loose structure for the rest of the film, which centers around Robert's attempt to convince women she meets to join her in the hills. Each woman, confronted in this way, responds to the challenge by revealing her consciousness —her aims in life, her dreams for herself, her fantasies about her future, the ties to her present life, etc..

In the chicken lady sequence, Roberta and the lady are joined by the cowboy (Kathryn McHargue), who evokes a lot of response because of the male-like clothes. Her image is the typically liberated one of the early 70s—jeans, shorthair, shirt, heavy shoes. She's attractive and charming, and neatly fields the challenges. This conversation, however, goes on too long. It is obviously improvised, and while many comments are witty, at times it drags. It ends humorously, with country music on the track again, the chicken lady in a new image with the gun. She is shooting wildly, and almost trips as she goes off with Roberta.

The fourth sequence opens with a marvelous cowboy image. The woman from the chicken lady scene is seen atop a horse on a hill, parodying numerous similar shots in Westerns, but at the same time symbolizing this woman's strength and independence. The main themes of this sequence—whose highpoint is Roberta's dream—is the contrast between

independent womanhood, symbolized by both Roberta and the cowboy, and dependent or more traditional womanhood, symbolized primarily by the woman who wants to set up a dance hall in California or run off with “her” cowboy. Paige cuts from the shot of the cowboy on the hill to the dance hall woman, dressed appropriately in traditionally feminine clothes, long flowing skirt and flattering blouse. She is seen fighting with her friend (Frances Jones) over her wish to depart with her cowboy. This scene dissolves to the cowboy again. Her image punctuates the sequence, almost functioning like a refrain as an image of peace, solitude and strength.

Fade out, to open on Roberta, asleep, hat over face, stretched out on the ground. The camera moves in on her and then cuts to her dream which is told with Roberta’s standing, trance-like, in middle distance in the open field. Her dream in some ways parallels the feathered lady’s story at the start of the film. That bitter story of failure and disappointment revealed the inadequacies of social conventions and institutions. Roberta’s dream, in contrast, suggests an alternative vision of peace and harmony in a community of women. But there is a double-edged quality to Roberta’s dream as there had been to the feathered lady’s story. An intensity that suggests real involvement with the vision on a symbolic level is counterbalanced by an ironic commentary on aspects of the women’s movement in the early 70s-going back to nature, doing without men, and organic food. The dream paradoxically has traditional mythic elements in the description of women in organdy coming down to eat, songs flowing from their feet. Visions by Dante or Blake, of heavenly hosts of angels floating through the clouds, come to mind. The presumably deliberate analogy provides a comment on the utopian thinking that often characterized the early phase of the women’s movement. Real sincerity emerges, however, in the statement,

“All women there will be revered, and always ... always ... whatever they want. If I can tell them that, maybe I can get more people to come to the commune.”

The dream ends, and Sheila cuts to a close up of the cowboy again, this time happily yodeling to herself. It is a touching, real moment. We then cut to the quarrelling group around the dance hall woman, who are seen walking through the trees. Roberta stops them in a mock holdup, and they all sit down together to picnic, complete with guns and rifles. This scene is rather unsatisfactory. There is a lot of confusion because the women lose track of their fantasies and roles, and seem to be straining too hard for effect. Particularly awkward is an Indian (Dorothy Stensland) on a horse who keeps floating in and out of the scene, but no one seems to know how to bring her into the drama. But there’s a lot of fun at the expense of Westerns, with a mock tying up of the woman jealous of the cowboy, and so on. The scene ends with Roberta asking if they’ll join her commune, and some discussion of this.

This leads into the final sequence of the film, which is the most complex and was probably the most difficult to edit. The pace of the film up to

now has been slow and easy. The atmosphere by and large has been relaxed and humorous, with pleasant country music and slow conversations. The pace and tone of the last sequence are in contrast to all this. Editing is more rapid, and there are quick montage series of shots that add to the overall sense of tension and urgency. The actors are more themselves here, as the women begin to face the actual conflicts and differences among themselves. The style appropriately reflects the urgency and sensitivity of the issues raised.

The women are grouped around a campfire at night, and are deciding whether or not they will join Roberta. The darkness is suitable for the changed tone of things, and heightens the feeling of imminent separation. Important issues are raised, such as what women need men for. One woman asks, "What's so terrific about men?" and is told by the feathered woman (Frances Cima) that she wouldn't be here if it weren't for men, and furthermore that it isn't right to bring a child into an unnatural situation like a women's commune. Women who disagree with her want to know what she wants with men, and they get into the issues of sex, love, friendship, etc.. The camera slowly circles the group as the conversation goes on, catching faces and expressions, and the seriousness of it all, in sudden contrast to the previous humorous treatment of essentially the same issues.

Interspersed in this conversation are some of the women's fantasies about how the commune would have turned out had they tried. The chicken woman is seen in long lines of corn, bemoaning the insect-ridden corn and noting how everyone has changed for the worse. Cut back to the campfire group, and the Indian's bitter comment that she's sorry these are the kinds of attitudes people have. Back to the chicken lady's fantasy and her comment that Susie Starlet should have been allowed to have her dance hall. Paige then cuts to Susie, who is seen coming into the corn field, all dressed in white with a white chalked face, reminiscent of tribal dancers.

We cut back to the tree and the campfire, Roberta now in close up, colors rich and varied, the tone softened. Paige intercuts shots from Roberta's original dream sequence, reminding us of the positive vision along with these negative ones emerging now. The camera closes in on Susie Starlet's face around the campfire, and we then cut to her fantasy in the corn field, where she is again all dressed in white with white face makeup. In long distance, she begins to talk about her misery, and then goes completely crazy, jumping up and down and appearing like a frail rag doll. Back at the campfire, the cowboy talks of going to San Francisco, to get away from it all. The movie ends with Susie Starlet's friend, dressed in horse riding clothes, miming riding away, to the sound of "Camptown Races" on the track.

The ending of the film thus is somewhat negative, and students in a class always want to know why Paige didn't show the commune working out. Isn't Paige conforming to the stereotype that women will fail at anything they undertake? Paige, however, feels that the film shows

women acting in real ways rather than as we might wish women would act. I think her film is especially valuable in bringing to consciousness the kinds of images women in fact do have of themselves and that are a result of having been socialized in a patriarchal system. Even the images of freedom and independence have a masculine form: we simply do not have other natural images, since in our system men do symbolize autonomy and self-motivation.

In allowing the women to develop their own “stories,” Paige has captured diverse and important unconscious self-definitions that apply to many women. In letting women’s unconscious minds surface through the fantasies, Paige has arrived at some truths that we may not like but need to know. Implicit in the fantasies is the influence of the media—especially movies—in shaping women’s ideas of themselves. Instead of focusing explicitly on social and political arenas, as in the cinema verité films discussed previously, Paige focuses on some women’s struggle with unconscious wishes, desires and goals in life as they have been shaped in this society, and on other women’s fantasies for alternative ways of living.

Part of the value of Paige’s cinematic intervention lies in her sincere appreciation of the women she was working with and of whatever they had to say. This is the kind of caring and attention that women rarely get on the screen. In the commercial cinema, no one listens to women or cares what they really think. Paige’s accepting and genuinely humorous attitude is most welcome. Women are seen in all their different mixtures of weakness and strength, their capacities for togetherness and their leaning toward separateness; their ability to change and their clinging to conventional roles. But none of them is judged. Because of this the viewer also accepts them, regardless of their differences from her.

Besides being funny, enjoyable and visually interesting, the film is useful in revealing to women the kind of mental world many of us live in. The narrative discontinuities, the careful juxtapositions of contrasting images, the judicious use of sound for satiric comment -- all these create the feeling of a world in transition. Not located within any specific place or time, but apparently trying to break from an oppressive past, with their futures uncertain, these women perfectly represent the confused, transitional situation of many women today. The unresolved ending was fitting for Paige’s overall intentions in the film: she wanted to help us understand the reality of our situation as women in a patriarchal culture, an understanding that is a necessary precondition for discovering strategies for change. She did not intend to anticipate answers, leaving this rather for people watching the film to speculate about.

In introducing to women’s films the world of imagination and of fantasy, Sheila Paige has indicated a valuable area for women to work with. We need more films like this one; not, of course, to replace the directly political and psychological ones that I discussed at the start, but to compliment those literal kinds of explorations and consciousness raising

with a different and often neglected mode.(17)

## Notes

1. The term “cinema verite,” adapted from a phrase of Dziga Vertov’s, refers to the French film style that evolved during the late 50s, in reaction to conventional, large-studio kinds of film where staging, post-production dubbing, and other devices interfere with the so-called “cinema truth.” The term is now loosely used for documentary films made with handheld camera, shot on location and not using actors.

2. Kate Millett’s *Flying* refers to the conditions of the film’s making. For information regarding CONTINUOUS WOMAN, I talked to Darlene Marvey from the Twin Cities Film Collective.

3. Other films in this category are ROSELAND, which stimulates discussion around female media stereotypes, so drastically and confidently does Rose depart from them; SYLVIA, FRAN AND JOY, which follows three different styles of marriage: one that ended in divorce and an independent life for the woman, one a traditional marriage, and the third a counterculture sort of marriage; GROWING UP FEMALE, which explores the various lives of six contrasting women of different ages, classes and backgrounds; and SWEET BANANAS, which traces the contrasting lives of some working class and upper class women, who end up all getting along.

4. ROSELAND, as mentioned in note 3, is an extreme kind of intervention of this type on the simple level of critiquing the usual cinematic image of women.

5. See “Dialogues with British Feminist Filmmakers and Critics,” by E. Ann Kaplan (*Women and Film*, forthcoming).

6. Ibid, p. 5.

7. “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” in *Notes on Women’s Cinema*, edited by Claire Johnston (London, SEFT Pamphlet, 1973), p. 29

8. Ibid., p. 20.

9. Ibid., p. 29, In connection with cinema verité as a film style, see Eileen McGarry, “Documentary, Realism and Women’s Cinema,” in *Women and Film*, 2:7 (Summer, 1975), pp. 50-59.

10. Cook and Johnston, “The Place of Women in the Cinema of Raoul Walsh,” in *Raoul Walsh*, Phil Hardy, ed. (Colchester, England, 1974. An Edinburgh Film Festival Pamphlet); and *The Work of Dorothy Arzner*, ed. Claire Johnston (London, 1975; a British Film Institute Pamphlet), with essays by Cook and Johnston.

11. “Dialogues.”

[12.](#) Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate* (London, 1972), Chapter I.

[13.](#) In England, the first women's films were about working women, e.g., Esther Ronay's WOMEN OF THE RHONDDA; BETTSHANGER, KENT 1972, made by the London Women's Film Group; WOMEN AND THE BILL, made by Esther Ronay and the Notting Hill Women's Liberation Group.

[14.](#) Norm Fruchter, "Games in the Arena: Propaganda of the Spectacle," in *Liberation Magazine*, May, 1971.

[15.](#) Laura Mulvey has recently made an avant-garde film, PENTHESILEA (with Peter Wollen), that attempts to interrogate the notion of identification in the cinema; Susan Stockman's films consist of beautiful but abstract images; Mildred Iatrou, presently a student at City College of New York, has made a striking short film in a Maya Deren style, with its unique ideas as well.

[16.](#) Sheila Paige visited my class twice following a showing of her film. This material was obtained in class discussion.

[17.](#) I wish to thank Julia Lesage for her thoughtful reading of the manuscript and the useful suggestions she made.

### *Children of Rage* Celluloid futility in the Middle East

by Richard Wagner

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 11-12

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

Arthur Allan Seidelmann's *CHILDREN OF RAGE* is a textbook example of a film promising more than it can deliver. For about a year, rumors of the "explosiveness" of the movie have circulated among cineastes. Blurbs and articles had heralded the film in such publications as *Variety* (the fact that they appeared in *Variety*, the profit-oriented trade paper, should have been adequate forewarning). It was proclaimed a "breakthrough" because it was to be the first fictional treatment of the post-1967 Israeli-Palestinian situation. But by trying to be fair to all sides, Seidelmann's film has the efficacy of a marshmallow thrown against the ITT building.

Seidelmann's chief defect is that he endeavored to be nice to everybody. He created Israeli and Palestinian characters of equal dimensions and equal believability. The plot is rather simple, used merely as a prop upon which the director can hang his attitudes out to dry.

When Aqmed, a Palestinian guerrilla, is killed, his brother Omar takes his place. Omar is wounded while disguised as an Israeli but escapes from the hospital to avoid questioning. Before being transported to the safety of the camps, he is treated by David, an Israeli doctor and friend of the family. David's conscience persuades him to go to the camp to help alleviate the suffering. The resistance he gets from some of the militants culminates in the death of him and Omar.

There are four main characters, each of whom is a personified ideal, and a galaxy of minor ones. David, the doctor, is the epitome of libertarian rationality. He is an idealist, wanting peace and harmony among Jews and Arabs, yet with no concrete knowledge of how to achieve it. In his naiveté he blunders into his own death. Omar, the teenaged guerrilla, is the opposite with all visceral feeling and little thinking. He views all Israelis as evil and is willing to die blindly for his cause. Ibrahim, the Palestinian leader, sees the current violence only as the last resort. He just wants his Galilean farm back and is willing to listen to reason; he is



the thinking Arab. Leila, Omar's sister, is the emotional representative. Her interest is purely apolitical; she doesn't want to have happen to Omar what happened to Aqmed.

Seidemann obviously wanted to present all sides of the Middle East question. His characters serve mainly as mouthpieces for his egalitarian opinions. He artificially constructs dialogue situations in order to expose all ramifications of the problem to the light. David visits his father, a European post WW2 immigrant. Seidemann uses the confrontation as an excuse to show the conflict of classic liberalism vs. intransigent father, or young generation vs. old, if you will. The father trots out all the ancient pro-Israeli arguments ("We were here 2,500 years ago," "We carved this land out of a desert," etc., etc.). David's lack of firm convictions leads to his rather weak retorts and the discussion reveals nothing new.

Again Seidemann thrusts David into a one-to-one conversation and again he finishes second best. When Ibrahim comes to take Omar to the camp, David requests to go along. The two of them talk back and forth over the unconscious Omar. Both ask the question, "What do you want?" Ibrahim's response is his return to the ancestral farm; he puts forward a very cogent argument for his position. David's reply is, "A week of peace." Once again his want of political awareness prevents him from taking a forceful stand.

In addition to attitudinal flaws, Seidemann's script has holes in it big enough to drive a tank through. Just to enumerate the more glaring ones:

1) When Omar first arrives at the camp, Ibrahim conducts a thorough inquiry into his credentials to ascertain that they are not a forgery. Yet when David asks to accompany Omar to the camp, Ibrahim, who has never seen him before, asks, "How do I know you are not a spy?" David replies, "I give you my word." and Ibrahim accepts it. Can anyone seriously believe that a guerrilla leader would scrupulously check the papers of an Arab but instantaneously accept the word of an Israeli?

2) When David becomes the Palestinian camp's doctor, Leila wishes to help him. He asks what qualifications she has. Her answer is, "I always wanted to be a nurse." Incredibly, David uses her in that capacity. Is that all that is necessary to fulfill a childhood dream? What if she had always wanted to become a doctor? Would he have allowed her to treat patients? Further comment on such a ridiculous assumption would be redundant.

3) When he first sets himself up in the hospital, David stocks it with many and various medications. How did he obtain them? Are we to believe that the Israelis permitted him to saunter out of their hospital with cartons of pills, syringes, etc., especially after he had applied to Israeli authorities for permission to go to the camp and had been refused?

The film is important in one respect. Ibrahim is the first sympathetic portrayal of a Palestinian, instead of the usual U.S. equation of Israeli = good, ergo Palestinian (and by extension all Arabs) ,= bad. But even some of his reasons for certain actions are left vague. The question arises of whether or not to use terror, the words “Algeria” and “Vietnam” are conspicuously bandied about, followed by “Now it is our turn.” Just like that the decision is made. I strongly doubt whether that particular motivation has any historical validity.

Seidelmann’s casting also does nothing to establish any kind of realistic aura. Helmut Griem as David is much too Aryan-looking and wooden to be convincing. Olga Georges-Picot as Leila is more attractive than effective. Richard Alfieri as Omar and Simon Andreu as Ibrahim are what matinee idols should be—handsome, smooth, supremely confident. The professionalism they display is the diametric opposite of what the roles demand. In addition, Seidelmann employs the technique of romantic fade-outs at the end of each scene, further increasing the film’s detachment from reality.

The question that occurred to this viewer at end of the film was, “Is it pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian?” Seidelmann has created characters useful for articulating many viewpoints. But in so doing, he loses whatever focus and thrust the film could have had. Had he come down on one side or the other, the audience could have experienced some kind of reaction. As it stands, Arab sympathizers will love it for its depiction of the guerrillas in human terms and hate the Israeli military officers. Those who emotionally side with Israel will love the dogmatism of David’s father and hate all the Palestinians. Seidelmann’s film is, in effect, a cinematic Rorschach test to which people will respond depending on what they bring to it.

### Numéro Deux Godard's synthesis: politics and the personal

by Reynold Humphries

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 12-13

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

Godard's espousal of Marxism-Leninism and his forming with Jean-Pierre Gorin of the Dziga Vertov Group in 1968 had two major results. It lost Godard the support of most of those who had championed his work up to 1967, it and removed him from the public eye for four years. The latter was deliberate, Godard preferring to work in alternate film circuits. The former was inevitable and is a measure of Godard's importance in the evolution of a revolutionary cinema.<sup>(1)</sup>

Godard has always been a very controversial director, arousing enthusiasm and hatred in equal quantities. The enthusiasm, while having the unfortunate side effect of creating a new cult figure, was nevertheless positive in one way. Because of the controversy surrounding the director, it drew attention to Godard's particular sort of filmmaking: improvisation and inconsequentialities, dislocated narrative and an increasing move towards a strong heterogeneity of the pro-filmic material (ads, posters, TV). These are all elements that Godard used later in his career, but with an explicitly political flavor.

The fact that, up to *PIERROT LE FOU* in 1965, these above-mentioned devices tended not to foreground politics and were constant factors in the director's work had a predictable result. Godard became the ultimate auteur, an inimitable stylist who put his stamp indelibly on each movie. The concept of auteur is invaluable to the purveyors of the dominant bourgeois ideology. Such critics who adopt it<sup>(2)</sup> prefer to discuss a work in terms of its themes. This is especially so when the themes are recurrent and therefore seem to homogenize the texts into a single, unified, unbroken text. Or, if the themes are dangerous, auteur critics can resort to an exclusive analysis of the means of expression. Either way, HOW meaning is produced and WHAT meaning are problems thus avoided. The director remains an auteur, cut off from everything but his personal tastes in movies (Godard was a great help here as a

former critic himself) and his previous films.

As long as the dislocations of “standard” narrative (itself an artificial device, naturalized by years of use) were not too extreme and as long as politics were limited to questions that any remotely progressive person would consider important—Algeria (LE PETIT SOLDAT), war (LES CARABINIERS), Vietnam (PIERROT LE FOU)—the critics in the “intellectual” papers and reviews were happy. For Godard’s detractors, of course, everything he did that was different—such as positioning the camera in the back seat of a car in BANDE À PART—was too extreme. By 1966, however, Godard’s anarchism (easily recuperable because never politically explicit) had given way to a more clearly-defined leftwing position that was quite incompatible with the liberal metaphysical anguish purveyed in ALPHAVILLE (and remarkably purveyed, but the question lies elsewhere). Thus DEUX OU TROIS CHOSES QUE JE SAIS D'ELLE marks the first major break in Godard’s work. Not only do we have an explicit political analysis of capitalism in France in the 1960s. But the film also relentlessly questions the representational techniques brought into operation to convey the meaning and function of that capitalist society. Godard is now interrogating the cinema itself.(3)

Twelve months later comes the second break. It is in the final sequence of WEEKEND where Leaud walks around reciting political tracts. All attempts at “realism” have been abandoned. Godard is foregrounding with increasing insistence the need to question every code at work in the filmic text: creation of a homogeneous time scale and a corresponding space; the matching of sound and image (what is the point of “realism” if a text foregrounds its own fictional status?). Just as shocking from the “moderate” standpoint is his rejection of previously cherished art forms such as classical music: Mozart is now irrelevant.(4) Several months later come LE GAI SAVOIR and the final break with every tradition of commercial filmmaking. May ‘68 is already in the air and Godard’s move to an extreme leftwing position does not pass unnoticed. The ruling class prevents the film from being screened on French TV, for which it was made. This was also to be the fate of other films commissioned for television: BRITISH SOUNDS (B.B.C.), PRAVDA (German TV), LOTTE IN ITALIA (Italian TV) and VLADIMIR ET ROSA (German TV).

With films like LE GAI SAVOIR, VENT D'EST and VLADIMIR AND ROSA (I haven't seen the other film from this period), Godard not only abandoned plots and narrative and foregrounded revolutionary politics, he also moved away from the concept of the individual and the portrayal of human relationships and interpersonal relations. Thus vanished the last and most tenacious link with bourgeois art: the character moving in a world which is subordinated to his personality and individual problems. By 1968 this has vanished, at least until TOUT VA BIEN in 1972.

TOUT VA BIEN is centered on the political education of a vaguely

committed couple. If it has a fault, it lies in the fact that Godard and Gorin seem unsure as to whether to concentrate on this politicization or on the meaning of the events that radicalize the husband and wife. Clearly the two aspects of the film are inseparable. But I can't help wondering if Godard and Gorin may not have felt trapped by using two big stars. I suspect that the danger of foregrounding their personal relations was clear to the film's makers, hence the reduction to the minimum of scenes involving their life together in favor of their lives outside the home (hence the crucial scene in the cafe where they talk to/at one another).

With NUMÉRO DEUX, however, Godard—now working alone—has solved this possible discrepancy. He brings politics and men/women relations into the home so that mere interpersonal and conjugal problems never run the risk of being analyzed for their own sake. From this point of view the film is crucial.

There is a sequence where the young wife returns home with the shopping and flops down on the bed, exhausted. Then she pulls up her skirt, pulls down her underpants and starts to caress herself. Her husband comes home, walks into the bedroom, kisses her, watches her for a moment and then suggests that they caress one another. He starts to kiss and fondle her, but she tells him to go away and to shut the door behind him.

It is an apparently banal sequence, but central to the film: it asserts the right of women to use their bodies as they like for their own pleasure, and not just to put them at a man's disposal. Beyond this, Godard is calling for women to have the right to take the initiative and not to subordinate themselves to the man's view of woman or of how women should fight to liberate themselves to the man's view of woman or of how women should fight to liberate themselves. These notions are presented in a variety of ways and situations:

- 1) The couple are trying to get the washing machine to work, and the man gives instructions: no response from the machine. Then the wife tries and the machine works. Thus the concept of the man's technical know-how and "inevitable" superiority over the woman is undermined.
- 2) The man asks his wife to come to bed as he wants to make love. She refuses. He caresses her, she fails to respond. He gets angry, slaps her head and stalks out. She remains where she is. Once again, the woman disposes herself of her own body. A variation on this occurs after a quarrel: the wife puts on earphones and listens to music, deliberately ignoring her husband who wants to talk things over. Significantly, he can neither leave things be nor remain calm (as the wife wants to and does). Faced with her refusal to bow to his wishes, he becomes violent.
- 3) One position the couple adopt in their lovemaking is with the man on his back and the woman sitting astride him, facing away from him with her behind near his face; this, so that he can kiss her behind and see a part of her she cannot see. We have the same situation again: superiority

of the man's sexual rights, not only in deriving pleasure from his wife while giving none in return and having control over a certain part of her body, but also being able to dominate the situation by not having to expose his face to his wife's scrutiny while indulging in his pleasure. This the concept of a shared experience, central to love and sex, disappears; only the man retains all rights. (This might explain his uncertainty in another scene where he hesitates over whether or not to kiss his wife's genitals; they are facing one another now and Godard overlays his face looking at her with her face looking challenging at him).

4) This scene is given a more explicitly political edge than elsewhere. The wife points out that there is a part of her husband he never sees either, that only she can see: his behind. But the context is radically different: she sees it when he goes off to work in the morning, whereas she has no work and has to stay at home. Thus there is no question of sexual equality. He either appropriates her body but refuses to allow her to do the same. Or else he has the right to work, whereas her work must be done in the home.

Ultimately, he is no more working for himself than she is, although he does not have a role, a function, imposed on him the way she does. Also of interest here is that, under capitalism, the worker's labor is appropriated by another (the capitalist) through a financial system that is kept secret from him. Thus the husband/wife relations in the above-mentioned sequence become a paradigm for the capitalist/worker relations on the labor market.

5) This kind of thinking is extended in another sequence where Godard makes a particularly effective use of two images. On the left, the older woman (the mother, who with her husband lives with the young couple) is scrubbing the floor ("typical" woman's work). On the right, the wife gives her husband a blow job. Or at least a partial one: she is not enthusiastic. Again, she is at his sexual beck and call, just as the mother is at the man's beck and call. The blow job is used again in the film, this time juxtaposed with a shot where the wife refuses an invitation to go to a Women's Liberation meeting, saying she has other things to occupy her.

It is at moments like this that Godard shows the need to move outside the home into the political arena, but only when the woman has had the opportunity for self-analysis at every point. The fatal trap is for the woman to see herself as the man sees her, including within the context of the revolutionary struggle. Man plus violence equals the degradation of woman. Giving her a rifle to shoot doesn't solve the problem. For the rifle is first and foremost a male weapon, and for the woman to use one is, yet again, to subjugate herself to a male role. Godard would seem here to be criticizing the ultra-leftist position of treating men and women exactly alike. Such an attitude runs the risk of masking the differences between the sexes in the name of equality and revolution, for neither can occur without coming to terms with these differences. It is in no way a case of regressing to bourgeois individualism, but of

recognizing the sexual element, something revolutionaries are often loath to do, in the name of a very limited and limiting view of “equality.” The danger of the man’s thinking he knows best is always present and is summed up by the young wife when she says that the man tells the woman what to do or, worse, she says it for him, i.e., portrays herself in his image of her.(5)

The images the cinema uses to present and reproduce events is an aspect of the film that has preoccupied Godard increasingly since 1966, finding its most forceful expression in VENT D'EST. What values and ideas are already contained in an image from the fact of its mere presence? How does a spectator piece together the various images into a “coherent” and “meaningful” discourse? Godard approaches the problems involved by trying to undermine the concept of the unique and natural image on the one hand, and of a transparent, linear narrative on the other. The latter question doesn't really arise in NUMÉRO DEUX which is a series of fragments presented as such. Or rather, the problem is there at once because the film is composed of such fragments. But Godard displaces the narrative interest here onto the meaning of each individual image, the interaction between the various images projected simultaneously onto the cinema screen, and the meaning of a present image when seen in the context of an absent image. This way the spectator is constantly obliged to perform acts of synthesis through de- and re-construction.

At no time does any image of NUMÉRO DEUX fill the entire screen. What we have is an image in the shape of a TV screen filling a part of the screen, on the left or on the right. More usually, there are two images, sometimes more. Interacting with these images are the numerous titles of the film, introduced as constant breaks in the visual discourse and commenting on the image(s). The word REPRODUCTION is thus followed by an image of the old man talking on a big screen on the left of the cinema screen, followed immediately by and coexisting temporally and spatially with the same image on a smaller screen on the right. Thus the uniqueness of “art” is demolished. Godard foregrounds the technique of reproduction central to film and TV, showing that art has far less to do with it than has a mechanical use and application of scientific knowledge. Walter Benjamin commented on this phenomenon in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*:

“To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense.”

Those who control the means of production and distribution, be it of capital or products such as film and TV programs, thus have in the case of the mechanical image unlimited possibilities for disseminating their ideology. Their “image of what the world is” becomes the sole image on the screen, and the creation of meaning becomes natural meaning. What

is so important in NUMÉRO DEUX is the fact that Godard is present on the screen as the person organizing the discourse before us. There is no attempt on his part to hide himself, as the bourgeoisie must do—in its desperate attempts to mask the image as meaning produced and to pass it off as natural meaning given for all time. Thus Godard's hands are seen manipulating equipment to change images and to add various sounds and voices. It is in his use of sound that Godard most clearly reveals his own film as an artifact capable of unlimited meanings and, consequently, of misrepresentation.

The final sequence of the film shows two separate images, with accompanying soundtrack. Godard, in the foreground, uses the equipment constantly to change the soundtrack. Then the images disappear, but the commentary continues, despite the fact that it seemed to be coming from the mouth of the wife, whose image has now vanished. Normally when we watch a film, nothing lets us know that the sound emanating from the screen is reproduced separately, that it is not natural, that other sounds can be substituted (comic effects can be obtained this way by putting in place of the sound expected—because “natural—a sound usually linked to something quite different). By foregrounding equipment and continuing in sound only, once the images have faded from their respective screens, Godard questions the entire means of presentation of sound and image. This he has already evoked in the film's opening sequence.

The screen contains the words MON TON SON. Alongside SON (to its right) appears the word IMAGE, flashing like a neon sign. Then an image of the husband's face (partial, then complete), replaced by one of the wife's face (partial, then complete). What has to be grasped here is the polyvalence of TON and SON and their interaction with MON.

TON = “your,” but also “tone.”

SON = “his” or “hers,” but also “sound.”

MON = “my.”

Thus Godard underlines the presence in the text of semantic ambiguity and linguistic interference. He juxtaposes the interaction of sound and image and puts the question: whose image, for whom, by whom? That opening sequence contains not only NUMÉRO DEUX in embryo, but is a metaphor for the entire cinema.

The key question then: whose cinema? whose struggle for recognition? One sequence in particular shows the problems involved in politicizing people. Godard is manipulating the soundtrack for three images: 1) top left; 2) bottom left; 3) center right. 1) contains shots from various coming filmic attractions, including Yves Montand in Sautet's VINCENT, FRANÇOIS, PAUL ET LES AUTRES, a Bruce Lee movie and a soft-core porn movie. 2) is a news program and 3) shows images of the young couple's little girl copying a sentence on a blackboard. Particularly important in this sequence is the use of sound and the juxtaposition of the images of 1) and 2).



The second screen shows a leftwing May Day rally at the same time as the first shows Lee in action. One of the political personalities (all people function mainly as personalities when presented by the dominant ideology) talks of people's desire to struggle and the commentary for the Lee movie describes it as containing the greatest modern struggle. Which struggle therefore? On the one hand the proletariat is having to fight to preserve employment and a decent standard of living against the predatory ruling class. On the other hand the filmgoer—and to a great extent therefore the working class spectator—is encouraged by the purveyors of the dominant capitalist ideology to see the fascistic thuggery of a Lee movie as the great struggle. Godard is calling on the Left to displace the struggle, to move it onto a terrain where it can take the initiative. For as long as people are led to believe that the images of the world transmitted by the films made within a purely commercial framework are the sole images, then left wing figures—be they actors like Montand or trade unionists like Georges Seguy—will forever be recuperated, forced to struggle according to the rules of capitalism. They will continue to be just so much merchandise, like the films the former plays in. Godard puts the word MARCHANDISE on the screen at this precise moment.

The child is hence also seen as merchandise, and her degradation starts at an early age. Education is seen not as a learning process, but as a mechanical reproductive process: the girl has to copy a sentence to prove she can write. NUMÉRO DEUX thus juxtaposes two reproductive systems: that of the image and that of the written word. The former is meant to be unique, but is shown to be basically a technological phenomenon; the latter is claimed to extend knowledge, but in fact stifles it. Thus Godard reverses, comments on and destroys some of the most cherished and tenacious myths of bourgeois ideology. NUMÉRO DEUX is an essential movie for forcing people into an awareness of the function of the media and the viewer's position in a system that exploits the media for its very own special purposes. Godard encourages constant questioning by the spectator in order to avoid apathy, becoming a willing agent in one's own degradation. As the film states at one point: "When one enjoys being out of work, then fascism takes over."

## Notes

- [1.](#) The method employed by the ruling class to transpose all discussion of art onto the terrain already occupied and laid out by that class. All the weapons are thus in its hands, including what is to be discussed and how.
- [2.](#) Significantly, it is now commonplace in the discourse of those who had once so strenuously opposed it; they realize how it can be turned to their advantage.
- [3.](#) A film like MADE IN U.S.A. is seen as a case of a sensitive artist disintegrating before the pressures of the modern world. What is really collapsing, however, is an entire way of portraying that world that hides

its contradictions and refuses to take account of how meaning is produced. Even Glauber Rocha accuses Godard of destroying the cinema, which prompted Jean Paul Fargier (formerly of *Cinéthique*) to refer to Rocha, rather unkindly, as a “progressive.”

4. Or rather, the concept of Mozart as “genius” etc. is seen to be irrelevant in a world that cannot allow itself the luxury of such a fetishization of art. Significantly, those who champion his music never bother to ask why someone who produced so much died in poverty, forgotten and neglected.

5. From the point of view of the portrayal of sexual relations and the analysis of a person’s right to dispose of his or her body, NUMÉRO DEUX is the ultimate reply to those who consider that porn equals liberalization and revolution. A new review has just appeared in France called *L'Organe* (it has connections with *Screw*), devoted to porn, especially in the cinema. Its editor, Michel Caen, denounces opponents of porn as counter-revolutionaries. One can assume therefore that, for him, the presence on cinema screens of fucking and fellatio and the appearance of a review devoted to them herald in a revolutionary era. How mindless and pernicious this is can be gauged from analyzing what porn films stand for. First, they give people with sexual problems the chance to find some outlet without ever going into the social reasons for the inability of people to solve their problems in any other than a make-believe fashion. Thus they mask the social forces at work that help to cause sexual frustration and are thereby reactionary and counter-revolutionary. Second, they encourage people to assist in the degradation of sex and human beings without the shame of participating actively and, at the same time, reduce people to objects for the pleasure of others. As such, they allow a fascistic state to occur, not only in the film, but in the spectator.

Porn movies are apolitical and therefore are inscribed into and reinforce the dominant ideology. This state of affairs is now being helped along by the partisans of porn having recourse to various cultural alibis to justify *a posteriori* a) their own fantasies; b) their desire to *capitalize* on the fantasies of others. The key alibi adopted by *L'Organe* is to call a squalid little pornographer like Damiano “the Preminger of Porn.” It is not, of course, a case of comparing the directors, but of evoking the name of a celebrated director—read: “artist”—to lend some aura of respectability to an enterprise that is totally lacking in any. At every turn therefore porn merchants reveal themselves to be the spokesmen of the bourgeoisie: they pay people to degrade themselves and one another, encourage other people to pay to see this degradation, and purvey all the tenets of the dominant concept of “art” as an excuse. In other words, they are capitalist and counter-revolutionary to the core.

In France we can now see DEEP THROAT, DEVIL IN MISS JONES and a French film like EXHIBITION, which is honest in that it reveals its makers and voyeurs and, by extension, the audience too. In August we saw an entire festival of porn. The liberalization of censorship is not

an accident: it fits in perfectly with Giscard's desperate attempts to pass himself off as a progressive.

Whereas the authoritarian right wing views of de Gaulle and, especially, Pompidou were manifest all the time (police everywhere), Giscard has removed the "forces of law and order" from sight. They are now waiting in the background instead, and readers may like to know that Franco sends his police to France to be trained in riot-control. As people continue to believe in a relaxing of control, LE GAI SAVOIR stays banned.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

### The film industry responds to the Cold War, 1945-1955 Monsters, spys, and subversives

by Lawrence L. Murray

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 14-16

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

The phrase, Hollywood and the cold war, is likely to conjure a variety of diverse images and concepts in the mind of any student of the film industry. A survey of the literature, however, indicates that one response tends to dominate, the investigations in 1947 and 1951 by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the resulting blacklist of writers, directors, and other studio personnel accused of having communist sympathies.<sup>(1)</sup> Several participant victims and others less involved but equally antagonistic to the witch hunts of the committee have recounted the story in detail. They speak of the parade of friendly witnesses who were quick to point accusing fingers at the famous and not so famous. They remember the antics of the “Hollywood Ten” and others who sought to evade the maced hand of a committee bent on muckraking. And they recall the industry’s self-righteousness in its promulgation of the “Waldorf Statement,” which promised to deny employment to anyone suspected of less than orthodox, one-hundred percent Americanism. Intense focus has been on the blacklist, uniformly condemned, and the struggle of those blacklisted to regain their positions and to rehabilitate their reputations.

I want to approach the theme of Hollywood and the cold war from a perspective noted in the literature and then dismissed. Setting the HUAC committee and the blacklist aside, let us see how the products of the film industry, movies, reflected cold war dynamics and vicissitudes. In a sense, I want to examine not what the film industry said but what it did. In the process, I will look at more than just science fiction films, the most commonly cited illustration of the cold war’s impact on Hollywood productions. Cold war era films are historical documents which can inform us about how Hollywood responded to external pressures and how movies reflected the social milieu in which they were produced.

The element of external pressure is particularly crucial when appraising cold war era films. The cold war was several years old before Hollywood

began to acknowledge it in the content of its productions.(2) Because movies are not made in a social vacuum, they were bound eventually to reflect and to re-enforce the garrison state mentality which pervaded most people's minds here. That timetable, grounded in Hollywood's predilection to supply the public with films in which the viewing audience's needs, desires, and interests -- dreams -- are accommodated, was accelerated by extrinsic factors, specifically the 1947 HUAC investigation.

The film industry has traditionally been very responsive to any threat from external forces, especially if the force is government and the threat is some sort of censorship. To stymie interference in the manufacture and sale of its product as well as to protect freedom of choice as to what it shall make, Hollywood's stock response has been to assume a posture of voluntary self-censorship before something less palatable is imposed from the outside. For example, one cannot appreciate the 1934 formation of the Production Code Administration without considering the establishment of the Legion of Decency and hearings by the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce concerning the need for a federal censoring board. Lawrence Kardish has drawn a comparison between the P.C.A.'s voluntary self-censorship in the 1930s and the institution of the blacklist in the 1940s, viewing both as successful efforts to stifle official intervention in the affairs of the industry.(3) As a business, the film industry has been more successful than most in staving off government regulations by promising to police itself without the imposition of formal strictures, to promise delivery of what the public and its spokesmen in government demand.

I would argue that the phenomenon of voluntary self-censorship illustrated by the blacklist also manifested itself in other ways during the decade from 1945 to 1955. Selection of subject matter and shaping of content are also varieties of self-censorship, and that was never more true than during the height of the cold war.

In the course of the HUAC hearings in late 1947, several Hollywood moguls, notably Jack Warner and Louis B. Mayer, endeavored to apologize for, defend, and excuse the Wartime production of several blatant pro-Russian films. The changing circumstances of the postwar world caused such films as Warner's MISSION TO MOSCOW (1943) and MGM's SONG OF RUSSIA (1944) to be interpreted as both pro-Russian and pro-communist, though discussion of communist ideology was studiously avoided.(4) What Warner and Mayer contended was done in a spate of patriotism to inform the United States about its Soviet ally was now being looked upon as part of an insidious plot to undermine the country by infiltrating the public mind with nefarious communist ideas. Warner was questioned closely by a young freshman congressman from nearby Whittier, Richard M. Nixon, a man destined for fame and high office because of his ability to ferret out subversives. In the course of his questioning, Nixon asked Warner what anticommunist films Hollywood had produced. The industry titan lamely answered none as yet, but that his company had one in

production, *TO THE VICTOR* (1948).

Representative Nixon's query was not lost on the film industry. The logical implication of the question was that if the industry wished to prevent further interferences in the form of more investigations and damaging publicity, then it had better do more than blacklist suspect employees. To prove its patriotism as it had during the war, Hollywood would be well advised to generate a product which was acceptable to the powers that be in Washington. Congressman Nixon's implied suggestion was soon followed as the major and minor studios began grinding out all types of anti-communist films.

There was also the possibility that producing anticommunist films might well be good business for reasons other than holding the committee at arms length. Assuming the committee reflected widely held attitudes, anticommunist films might attract a substantial number of viewers. And attracting viewers, always a great concern, was never more important than it was in 1947. The previous year had been the zenith of the industry, as gross revenues topped \$1.7 billion with a record of 4,127,000,000 admissions. However, the security and self-satisfaction generated by such figures soon evaporated. 1947 was the year in which television began to challenge the industry, and attendance figures, as well as profits, started downward. Something had to be done to entice the prodigal movie fans out of their living rooms and back into theaters.

The film industry also suffered from other maladies in 1947 beside television, making the HUAC Committee's intrusion that much more threatening. The "Paramount decision," languishing in the courts since 1938, was handed down in late 1946. Though appeals would not be exhausted until 1950, the decision put the industry on the defensive. The courts directed distributors and producer/distributors to divest themselves of have their theater ownership, a severe financial loss, and to cease some policies such as establishing admission prices and block booking. The first successful intervention by the government into the affairs of the industry, perhaps a precedent, the Paramount decision might well have meant eventual economic disaster.<sup>(5)</sup>

1947 also witnessed a continuation of labor difficulties begun in mid-1945. A jurisdictional dispute between the Conference of Studio Unions and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees erupted in periodic strikes which caused delays in filming. Runaway production costs occurred. For example, 'A' pictures were budgeted at a minimum of \$1 million, as average shooting time doubled to ninety days, and wages increased after the wartime moratorium. Escalating costs frightened studio heads and independent producers alike, who were no longer convinced that the star system would assure financial success. A new policy of employing stars on a per-film basis with a salary based upon a percentage of anticipated profits replaced the old system of long-term contracts at stipulated salaries. Problems with foreign markets, variously estimated as providing between one-fifth and one-third of total industry revenues, were also disturbing. In spite of herculean



efforts by the Motion Picture Export Association of America and the State Department, every European country instituted some form of a quota system on imported films, increased taxes, and froze distributor assets. The most damaging of these was the British imposition in August, 1947, of a 75% customs duty on the value of each imported film. A seven-month MPEA-sponsored boycott eventually forced a compromise solution but at the cost of several million dollars in lost revenues. The film industry would ultimately remedy its difficulties in foreign markets on terms generally advantageous to Hollywood. But in 1947 it appeared that the protectionist attitude of the Europeans could mean a serious diminution in revenues.(6)

The combination of the challenge of television, the consequences of the Paramount decision, labor difficulties, increasing production costs and the erosion of the star system, plus problems with foreign markets placed the industry in the most hazardous financial position in its history. Hollywood believed that it was imperative that it satisfy its government critics and their sympathizers so it could turn its full efforts toward the vital issue of economic survival.

Movies which expressed the film industry's recognition of and response to the cold war came in a variety of forms and guises, which can be grouped together under four general headings. Common to all the films regardless of category was intense chauvinism coupled with strident anti-communism, factors which a content analysis of various productions will show.

The first and foremost category includes films which are blatantly anticommunist productions, movies clearly showing all concerned Hollywood's contempt for that foreign ideology. They could be described as educational/propaganda movies, films of persuasion which informed the public about the goals and techniques of an international conspiracy, directed from Moscow, which intended to undermine the American way of life. Obvious morality plays with the forces of good and evil locked in mortal combat. The messages were simple, straightforward, and readily comprehensible to even the densest viewer.

These films are important to the historian largely because of their educational/propaganda function. They put into visual form what heretofore had only been described verbally. And as they reflected the milieu in which they were made, they also aided in sustaining much of that milieu. Hollywood cannot be blamed for starting the cold war, but it does deserve a share of the credit for its perpetuation. Films included in the first category are: THE IRON CURTAIN (1948), THE RED MENACE (1949), I MARRIED A COMMUNIST (1949), THE CONSPIRATOR (1950), I WAS COMMUNIST FOR THE FBI (1951) WALK EAST ON BEACON (1952), MY SON JOHN (1952), and BIG JIM McCLAIN (1952). The last three will be examined later in the content analysis.

The second category of films reflecting the cold war's impact on Hollywood are the "hot" war films. These productions show the United States' battling with an assortment of overt enemies who threaten our

national security. This theme reenforces and intensifies the messages of the first group's morality plays and covert enemies. These hot war films go through three phases, with the enemy changing in each phase. The first phase, beginning in 1948 after nearly a three-year moratorium on war films, includes such productions as *COMMAND DECISION* (1948), *BATTLEGROUND* (1949), *THE SANDS OF IWO JIMA* (1950), and *THE HALLS OF MONTEZUMA* (1950). In these our WW2 enemies are resurrected. Accustomed to nationalistic propaganda films during the war, the public readily grasped the new presentation of the heroic U.S. military's combating enemies who, like the current enemy, were best known for their stealth and deviousness. Phase 2 came in 1951 with the ascendance of Korean War films such as *STEEL HELMET* (1951), *BATTLEZONE* (1952), and *ONE MINUTE TO ZERO* (1952).<sup>(7)</sup> Because Korea lacked the popularity of World War II, not nearly as many films were produced, and most were "B" grade. However, the enemy now was militant communism, and the viewer did not have to rely on leftover symbolic enemies. On the contrary, our one-time enemies were now our allies, and Hollywood began casting them in a more favorable light: witness the laudatory treatment of Rommel in *DESERT FOX* (1951) and the resulting outcry by some who objected to the new approach. Phase 3, Russia and China as the hot war enemies, never fully materialized in film, for it had not in real life. The potential did exist, however, and that potential is suggested in *HELL AND HIGH WATER* (1954).

A sub-grouping of films within the larger category of hot war productions is also relevant. These are the pro-military movies in which Russia is the unspoken enemy for whom we must be prepared. The best preparation, or so the public was informed by the Eisenhower administration, was airpower, and Hollywood bolstered that argument. *THE McCONNELL STORY*, *STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND*, and *THE COURT MARTIAL OF BILLY MITCHELL*, all appearing in 1955, as well as *BOMBERS B-52* (1957), *JET PILOT*. (1957), and *THUNDERING JETS* (1958) exemplify this group. These films stressed the United States' need for a strong air force against an enemy which at any time might shift its attack from subversion and infiltration to direct conquest. Like the hot war movies, these paeans to air power were made in cooperation with the Pentagon, thus assuring Hollywood that it would have at least one friend, and a powerful friend at that, in Washington. What better way could Hollywood trumpet its patriotism than by paying homage to the military?

A third category, somewhat more subtle and symbolic but still reflecting a trenchant cold war mentality, are those films labeled as science fiction. The so-called science fiction productions which symbolically mirror the cold war are interesting, as were the blatant morality plays of Group I, because of their educational/propaganda nature. Though the subject matter, an enormous beast or mutated giant ants as in *THE BEAST FROM TWENTY FATHOMS* (1953) and *THEM* (1954), might at first seem fantastic. The monster is presented in storylines which are quite plausible to the mind unfamiliar with the intricacies of science in the atomic age. While the public might not perceive the beast or the ants as



metaphorical enemies akin to Russia, a common interpretation by film critics and historians, the viewer is clearly taught to be wary of inept scientists and to have faith in the FBI and the military. Further, the public is taught to fear atomic power not only because it can be translated into bombs but because it can affect nature in strange, threatening ways. In a nation already fearful of atomic holocaust, such an argument could only intensify anxieties while spreading fear and uncertainty. As Howard Zinn has noted in a different context,

“Atomic energy was mysterious, almost supernatural; anything connected with it was frightening.”(8)

The fourth category includes those films which, although they appear wholly irrelevant thematically to any facet of the cold war, do include lines or scenes which seem to reflect a cold war mentality. The technique of inserting a line or a scene which expressed a political attitude was the very thing HUAC said the communists had been doing for years but could not document. Illustrative of the insertion technique are such things as the introductory scene of *SHE WORE A YELLOW RIBBON* (1949). A standard John Ford-John Wayne western, the opening scene showing all kinds of Indians riding in groups is accompanied by a narration which says that there is a conspiratorial unification of red people everywhere against America, and that if they are not stopped immediately, it will take a century to defeat them. The symbolism is unmistakable. Drawn in broader strokes is Elia Kazan's *VIVA ZAPATA* (1952), a film in which the viewer is continually reminded that all revolution is doomed to failure and that “a strong people is the only lasting strength of a nation.” A third illustration comes from *SPRINGFIELD RIFLE* (1950). Essentially a routine western, *SPRINGFIELD RIFLE* includes a series of lines arguing for the need of a military counter-espionage service.

One might also include in this category those films which can be interpreted by the skilled critic as articulating some sentiment reflective of the cold war, but which were very likely viewed in entirely different terms by the average viewer. For example, *HIGH NOON* (1952) was thought by most as simply an outstanding example of an adult western. However, a second impression has been offered, that the film is a statement by Carl Foreman, its writer, criticizing those in Hollywood who failed to come to the aid of their friends during the HUAC investigations. A second is *ON THE WATERFRONT* (1954), another Academy Award-winning film which most saw as an expose of how labor unions have been infiltrated by organized crime. Others saw it as an effort by its director, Elia Kazan, to justify his friendly testimony before the HUAC committee. Good films, like good literature, are subject to a variety of interpretations on several levels, yet only the most critical viewer, like only the most critical reader, will discern the more subtle nuances. Nevertheless, while most of the audience might miss the analogies in science fiction films, the inserted lines and scenes in others, and the deeper meanings of yet others, that does not mitigate the fact that such things do exist and hence deserve our attention.

With these four categories as a general descriptive framework of Hollywood's response to and involvement in the cold war, I would like to analyze the techniques, content, and messages of three selected films. The three chosen—WALK EAST ON BEACON, MY SON JOHN, and BIG JIM McCLAIN -- were selected primarily because of their enduring quality.<sup>(9)</sup> By *enduring* I mean that they appear regularly on television. MY SON JOHN had the singular distinction of being broadcast two years ago during prime time by ABC, a rare happening for any film of such an age, much less content. A case could be made that science fiction and hot war films also endure, but I have not found *specific* ones which reappear with the same frequency as the three chosen. The ones which have not endured fail to do so because the subject matter is dated, inappropriate in an age of detente, and because the production quality tends to be poor.

That so many of these cold war response films were rushed into production with inadequate thought and support was bound to affect quality. Critics generally panned them and box office returns were poor. Dalton Trumbo, one of the blacklisted Hollywood Ten, takes pleasure in the fact that MY SON JOHN, a major effort by Paramount, was a financial disaster. The implication is that he and his colleagues were redeemed because the public saw through these anti-communist diatribes and were unimpressed or turned off by their messages. I prefer to think that it was because the entertainment quality was so inferior that the public rejected the films. Any thought the industry may have had for exploiting a potentially lucrative market here was dashed by its own ineptitude.

The three films in question were selected for several other reasons besides endurance. They represent efforts by major and minor studios; they run the gamut of quality from excellent to mediocre to poor; and they represent obvious and clear responses to the cold war. Also, because they did not rely on symbolism or interpretation to convey their messages, the likelihood of interpretive error or arguments over interpretation are minimal. That some viewers have construed the science fiction classic INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1956) as both pro-McCarthy and anti-McCarthy is illustrative of the potential disagreements which I have sought to avoid by selecting films whose messages are straightforward and unequivocal, not metaphorical.

WALK EAST ON BEACON is Louis de Rochemont's contribution to Columbia Pictures to educate U.S. viewers visually about the existence of Russian spies in their midst. Already familiar with Russian agents (Klaus Fuchs, the Rosenbergs, and others) who had stolen atomic secrets, the audience is informed that an intricate web persists and that the subject in question is high speed calculators and computers.<sup>(10)</sup> Authenticity is verified by the use of a script drawn from a *Reader's Digest* article, "The Crime of the Century," by J. Edgar Hoover. As one would expect, the story is very appreciative of the talents, techniques, and exploits of the FBI. Filmic veracity in content and message is further enhanced by the use of neorealist, documentary techniques such as high

contrast black and white film, little known actors, and natural settings. The film has a narrator, a staple of documentaries such as de Rochemont's MARCH OF TIME series; the narrator's script is designed to promote credibility. These are techniques which were also exploited effectively by Henry Hathaway in HOUSE ON 92ND STREET (1945), a neorealist production which documented FBI destruction of a wartime German espionage ring. Both films were made with FBI cooperation, which among other things permitted filming in FBI headquarters and provided library footage of events at work in FBI laboratories. J. Edgar Hoover's imprimatur was even more valuable to the industry than that of the Defense Department when it came to blunting criticism.

Neorealist production techniques were also employed in crime films, one of Hollywood's most successful formula types. The similarity in technique and iconography between an anti-communist movie like WALK EAST ON BEACON and crime films like THE ENFORCER (1951 -- also entitled MURDER, INC.) was likely to lead to an overlap in the public mind between the two types. Russian spies were given identities very similar to gangsters and used comparable techniques, factors which enhanced familiarity and believability. The overlap is so strong that WALK EAST ON BEACON is identified today in *T.V. Guide* as a "crime drama."

Eschewing any form of plot summary, I plan to examine some selected factors, salient elements which appear in this film and many like it. First, both friend and foes are personalized, and the amorphous communist conspiracy is given identification. The FBI agent is played by that incipient politician George Murphy, the only readily known member of the cast. Friendly, hardworking and ever vigilant, a veritable Boy Scout grown up, Agent Murphy assures the viewer that the FBI uses the most modern methods and apparatus to ferret out the enemy. The Russian agent, a soldier in disguise and according to U.S. tradition deserving to be shot, is a sinister, ruthless personification of evil. He is willing to kidnap, murder, and commit adultery "to advance the cause" and satiate his carnal desires. In a fashion, he could be described as an unattractive James Bond type with a variety of gimmicks, but 1952 United States as opposed to 1963 United States found his amorality/immorality distasteful. From another perspective, his characterization and behavior were comparable to film/TV gangsters. Americans working under him are either dupes who are murdered when they recognize the error of their ways, or they are intelligent individuals, some in positions of trust, who have consciously betrayed their country and deserve to be executed legally.

In these characterizations and others there is more than a hint of anti-intellectualism. Anti-science attitudes and anti-intellectualism are common in the science fiction genre. Though science and technology might be beneficial and the high speed calculators are explained vaguely as integral to weapons systems, the people in charge, the scientists, lack common sense. The principal scientist, Professor Kafer, is a doddering old Jewish emigré from Germany who is blackmailed because his son is

behind the iron curtain. His fumbling, absent-minded demeanor recurs in many films, notably in THEM (1954), the cold war science fiction film. THEM also has James Arness playing George Murphy's part as the trusted FBI agent. The parallel between the two films continues, to include the same message:

"Trust the FBI and watch out for deadly monsters who (not which) infest America."[\(11\)](#)

Another element is a direct attack on the scientific and technical capabilities of the Soviet Union. Because there are no men of genius in Russia, it is necessary for them to steal from the minds of free men -- "Enslave a man's body, you enslave his mind," Professor Kafer tells us. This was the kind of conditioning which led to the shock and trauma following Sputnik when the U.S. public was confronted with the evidence that Russia was not as scientifically backward as was thought.

MY SON JOHN was Paramount Pictures' attempt at a first class presentation of the dangers of domestic subversion. Academy Award-winning director Leo McCarey was given a substantial budget, a prominent cast led by Helen Hayes and Robert Walker, and complete freedom in writing and directing to put the message across. Technically, the film is a standard dramatic production with only occasional uses of neorealist technique, such as the scene when John is gunned down on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in the classic gangster mode. Instead of trying to convince the audience that it is watching a true story unfold, in documentary fashion, an approach which does not draw the viewer into the film, MY SON JOHN tried to develop a dramatic production about typical people with whom the viewer can identify and for whom the viewer can develop considerable empathy.[\(12\)](#) The goal is to draw the audience into the film, to convince people that what they were watching could happen to them.

While the technical presentation differs markedly, there are certain similarities in content and message between WALK EAST ON BEACON and MY SON JOHN. Again, the FBI agent is cast as friendly, helpful, and unswerving in dedication. Enemy agents are essentially gangsters with foreign accents, but the matter of dupes or traitors is pursued in much more depth. The traitor John, once the pride of the family because of his education and career in government, is a pretentious effete and unfeeling snob who betrayed his family and country. The Alger Hiss imagery is very clear. John is contrasted to his two not-so-bright but athletic brothers who go off to fight and die in Korea. Whereas anti-intellectualism is only suggested in WALK EAST ON BEACON, here it is blatant. The viewer is given the inescapable impression that highly educated people become traitors, possibly homosexuals, whereas lesser educated, virile individuals become patriots.

WALK EAST ON BEACON received critical acclaim because of its effective presentation. MY SON JOHN was severely criticized, primarily because of one character, Dad -- John Jefferson. Whereas Mom, a very identifiable figure, is effectively presented as distraught over the

misdeeds of her firstborn, Dad is drawn as a caricature rather than a character. Instead of an identifiable, typical U.S. father, the audience is offered a thickheaded, unloving Archie Bunker type. A staunch member of the American Legion who has been studying communism yet who betrays his ignorance at every turn, John Jefferson stomps about the house, Bible in hand, singing a little ditty: "If you don't like your Uncle Samny, then go back to your home o'er the sea." (Translation: "America, Love It or Leave It.") A pathetic portrait of a patriot, John Jefferson's ludicrous figure is a futile effort at patronizing Legionnaires and Fathers. The picture is significantly weakened if not destroyed by it.

Director McCarey, best known for *GOING MY WAY* (1944) and *THE BELLS OF ST. MARY'S* (1945), adds a new dimension in this film, an association of Catholicism and anti-communism. The counselor of the family, Father O'Dowd, tries to help in the hour of need, and Dad finds his justification for anticommunism in his Bible. John commits blasphemy by swearing on the family Bible, with which his Father will later strike him. And so the audience is alerted to the fact that communism is a threat to the moral fiber of the country as well as to the national security.

*MY SON JOHN* shares with *WALK EAST ON BEACON* that great U.S. film tradition, the happy ending. Though slain on the streets of Washington for his recognition of communism's evils, the prodigal son lives on in a tape-recorded speech. Lest the audience fail to grasp the menace of communism, McCarey hammers home the message with John's recorded commencement address for his alma mater. The students sit stunned as the tape plays a Mao-like public confession and a warning to the new generation of "intellectuals" to be aware of communism's blandishments. The ending is needless overkill, which with the caricature of the Father, undermined the film and helped contribute to its demise at the box office.

Lacking even a pretense at sophistication, *BIG JIM McCLAIN* endures because it is John Wayne playing John Wayne. A founder of the anticommunist Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals with Leo McCarey, John Ford, and others, Wayne produced the film as a personal statement. He expressed his admiration for the valor of the HUAC committee, "undaunted by the vicious campaign of slander launched against them," as the narrator intones. It is the same type of unrestrained chauvinism Wayne articulated in his best known personal statement, *THE ALAMO* (1960).

Again we have anti-intellectualism, an untrustworthy college professor, and communists cloaked in the trappings of gangsters. New ground is broken, however, by promoting the HUAC committee and its agents as the heroes, instead of the FBI, and by associating communism with China instead of Russia. Wayne would continue that association later in *BLOOD ALLEY* (1955), his analysis of the Chinese revolution. Right and justice triumph, aided by Wayne's willingness to brawl with enemy agents.

Clearly the poorest and most inept production of the three, BIG JIM McCLAIN appears on television more frequently than the others, a tribute to Wayne's popularity. An effort by Wayne to express his patriotism and faith in HUAC, the film also is a blatant attempt to exploit the commercial possibilities of anti-communism at a time when the producer was in a desperate financial condition. A scathing indictment was offered by Bosley Crowther.

“But the over-all mixing of cheap fiction with a contemporary crisis in American life is irresponsible and unforgivable. No one deserves credit for this film.”<sup>(13)</sup>

Accurate perhaps, yet BIG JIM McCLAIN is far more representative of the average cold war, anti-communism film than the other two.

With the censure of Joseph McCarthy in 1954 and a more restrained House Committee on Un-American Activities. Hollywood breathed a sign of relief. No longer was it necessary to prove its patriotism, and it discontinued producing overtly anti-communist films. The impact of the cold war would still be seen in some of its products but not with the frequency and intensity that was witnessed during the years 1948 to 1954. In fact, by 1956 Hollywood would begin to challenge the HUAC committee with such productions as STORM CENTER, a direct attack on its former nemesis. Simultaneously, the Cinemascope effect was bolstering sagging revenues as more people were going to movies to see the wonders of the new technology. The industry had survived the challenge of television and the assault of the HUAC committee. No longer under fire, it could sit back and rest on its laurels, safe in the knowledge that it had once again stifled the threat of official intervention in its affairs. The dreaded blacklist would end, and by 1960 its membership would be back working under their own names. It was as if nothing had ever happened. Having survived, the industry conveniently forgot the price of its survival. <sup>(14)</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1.</sup> The HUAC Committee under Rep. Martin Dies (D-Texas) had first visited Hollywood in 1939, spending a year investigating potential communist subversion. The committee at that time drew something of an equation between anti-fascism and pro-communism.

<sup>2.</sup> As Charles Higham has noted, “In the Atomic Age, audiences wanted even more escapism than they had demanded during the war.” *Hollywood at Sunset* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), p. 6. Consequently, from 1945 to 1948 and even to a great degree thereafter, Hollywood preferred to ignore political and military issues and to emphasize such staples as musicals and westerns.

<sup>3.</sup> *Reel Plastic Magic: A History of Films and Filmmaking in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1972), pp. 177-79.

<sup>4.</sup> See Melvin Small, “Buffoons and Brave Hearts: Hollywood Portrays



the Russians, 1939-1944," *California Rhetorical Quarterly* (Winter, 1973), pp. 327-37.

5. Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 84-153, has a thorough discussion of United States vs. Paramount Pictures, 334 US 131 (1948). The decision by the Justice Department to attack the monopolistic practices of the film industry was part of the Roosevelt Administration's broad anti-trust program instituted in 1937-38.

6. Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry, Western Europe and America Since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 160-86, contains an extended description of the foreign economic difficulties which beset Hollywood in the immediate postwar period.

7. Another interesting film is the propaganda documentary WHY KOREA?, a 1951 production of Twentieth Century Fox and Movietone News distributed free of charge. A classic defense of Truman administration foreign policy, WHY KOREA? "documents" how the United States is engaged with the forces of Soviet communism in far off Korea. For comparative purposes, see WHY VIET NAM? (1965), a Defense Department production which revives all of the Cold War rhetoric and analyses.

8. *Postwar America, 1945-1971* (Indianapolis. Ind.: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1973), p. 158.

9. All appeared in 1952, the high point of Hollywood's crusade when over a dozen anti-communist films were made.

10. The theme of Russian spies bent on destruction of the West was first pursued in THE IRON CURTAIN (1948), a ludicrous parody of a Canadian-Russian spy case. The film also deserves a small niche in history as the first movie of the cold war era.

11. Quotation is from an anonymous author in "Focus on THEM," *Twentieth Century* (September, 1954), p. 197. The parenthetical statement [not which] was added by me for emphasis.

12. For a discussion of MY SON JOHN which stresses the emphasis on the typical, see "Father and Son -- and the FBI" by Robert Warshaw, *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1962), pp. 113-20.

13. *New York Times*, September 18, 1952.

14. For another analysis of the film industry during the cold war, see Russell E. Shain, "Hollywood's Cold War" and "Cold War Films, 1948-1952: An Annotated Filmography," *Journal of Popular Film* (Fall, 1974), pp. 334-50 and 365-72. The thoroughness and seriousness with which Shain approaches the subject is perhaps reflected in his filmography,

which includes such movies as AT WAR WITH THE ARMY (1952) starring Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, BOWERY BATTALION (1952) starring the Bowery Boys, FRANCIS JOINS THE WACS (1953) starring Donald O'Connor and his irrepressible talking mule. Shain also completely ignores science fiction films in both his article and his filmography.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



# **JUMP CUT**

**A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA**

## **Red Nightmare Asleep with the Defense Department**

**by Michael J. Jackson**

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 16-17

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

“I am happy to speak openly and honestly in an inquiry which has for its purpose the reaffirmation of American ideals and democratic processes ...”

“Our American way of life is under attack from without and from within our national borders. I believe it is the duty of each loyal American to resist those attacks and defeat them ...”

“Our company is keenly aware of its responsibilities to keep its product free from subversive poisons. With all the vision at my command, I scrutinize the planning and production of our motion pictures. It is my firm belief that there is not a Warner Brothers picture that can be judged fairly to be hostile to our country, or communistic in tone or purpose.”

-- Jack L. Warner, Testimony from the *Hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee*, October 20, 1947.

In 1939 Martin Dies, chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee, first declared that Communism was thriving in Hollywood. He asserted,

“Forty-two or forty-three prominent members of the Hollywood film colony were either full-fledged members of the Communist Party or active sympathizers and fellow travelers.”

In his two-part article in *Liberty* in 1940, he named JUAREZ as an example of a film which contained questionable propaganda.<sup>(1)</sup> Yet this mention of JUAREZ was not to be construed as a full-scale denunciation of Warner Brothers Studio. In fact, Dies singled out Warners for praise

as being very anti-Comunist.(2)

Indeed, anti-Communism was one part of a patriotic campaign emanating from the Studio's Hollywood headquarters. Warner Brothers gave free radio time every week on its station (KFWB) to "America Marches On," one of the first anti-Nazi, anti-Communist programs in the country. Each dramatization featured an address by Dr. John R. Lechner of the American Legion, and the formal sign-off of the program was the statement,

"Americans are opposed to Nazism, Communism, and Fascism."

After 1945, Nazism and Fascism officially were defeated, leaving only one enemy. Hitler's storm troopers gave way to Stalin's stalwart Red Army, and the Hollywood HUAC hearings arose in 1947 amidst the new turmoil of the Cold War. Jack L. Warner, Vice President in Charge of Production at the Studio, appeared twice before the committee, voluntarily, and a "friendly" witness. He pledged his allegiance to the investigation of the Parnell Thomas Committee and his support for the U.S., anti-Communist way. He even promised to initiate a fund to "ship to Russia the people who didn't like our American system of government and who preferred the communist system to ours."(3)

He declared,

"The Warner Brothers interest in the preservation of the American way of life is no new thing with our company. Ever since we began making motion pictures we have fostered American ideals and done what we could to protect them..."(4)

MISSION TO MOSCOW, the controversial 1943 pro-Stalinist picture, was no exception.

"This picture was made when our country was fighting for its existence, with Russia as one of our allies. It was made to fulfill the same purpose for which we made such other pictures."(5)

But if the Warners' loyalty was still in question, the Studio proved itself by dismissing twelve of its screenwriters of alleged Communist leanings.

By the 1950s all the Hollywood studios were demonstrating their national loyalty through films offering an active anti-Communist line. Some examples: MY SON JOHN at Paramount, SILK STOCKINGS at MOM, RED PLANET MARS from United Artists, MAN ON A TIGHTROPE and PICKUP ON SOUTH STREET at Fox. Warner Brothers joined the cause with BIG JIM McLAIN in 1952, in which John Wayne and James Arness battled the Communist curse from Washington, D.C. to Hawaii. The picture was unique in that it lauded the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee by

actually dramatizing a “mock” HUAC proceeding on the screen. (John Wayne has to hold Arness in harness when Wayne’s fellow crusader wants to punch out a contemptuous, hostile witness who repeatedly resorts to the Fifth Amendment when under government questions.)

The Warners’ anti-Communist crusade continued into its production of short films in the 1950s and 60s. While Warners’ press releases exclaimed, “Shorts Mean Business. Advertise and Exploit Short Subjects to Bring Added Revenue to Your Box Office,” these patriotic shorts were preplanned at a financial loss to the studio. However, these professionally budgeted works were crucial to Warners’ image as an Anti-Communist Crusader.

One such short was the peculiar RED NIGHTMARE (1962, reissued 1965), produced under the personal supervision of Jack L. Warner. The clear objective of this “educational film” was to make formal alliance with the Department of Defense Directorate for the Armed Forces and Educational Information, the cosponsor of the project.[\(6\)](#)

The cast and credits listed on RED NIGHTMARE are as follows:

“Cast: Jack Kelly; Jerry Donovan; Jeane Cooper; Mrs. Donovan; also Peter Brown, Patricia Woodell, Andrew Ougan, Peter Buck, Robert Conrad, Mike Road. Narrated by Jack Webb.”

“Credits: Direction, Jack Waggner; Production, William L. Hendricks; Screenplay, Vincent Fortre; Photography, Robert Hoffman; Music, William Lava; Screen Editing, Folmer Bronstead.”

The film opens with a shot of a militaristic town, a small city ensnared with barbed wire and covered with sandbags. Two soldiers are speaking secretly in a droll, Slavic accent,

“Americans have too many freedoms. It is our purpose one day to defeat these bourgeois capitalists.”

Jack Webb approaches the camera amid this xenophobia to give us a clue to the meaning of this short.

“Frightening, isn't it?” the old detective patrolman retorts from behind his invisible badge.

“This town could be in Iowa, California, or Tennessee, as American as apple pie and ice cream ... Appearances are deceptive. This is not an American town. It is assumed that such a town exists somewhere behind the Iron Curtain.”

“It is a town shrouded in secrecy ... a college town -- Communist style. Here they study the economic, political, and religious heartbeat of American institutions. The courses ... are simple: propaganda as a science, espionage as an art,

sabotage as a business ... deep in the Soviet Union.”

While the opening speech switches to voice over, we see a montage of ordinary U.S. scenes: a college campus, a malt shop, a laboratory, a blackboarded classroom. It's a general picture of a new England college -- students scurrying with books under their arms -- all part of the stream of life in the United States. These are sights and sounds from any ancient syndicated television show, remains from an earlier decade. The college campus looks like Walt Whitman High in *Room 222*, the malt shop might be from an old set from *Ozzie and Harriet*. This town has no peculiarity or eccentricity. It is the model of a leftover Eisenhower era community -- bland, unidentifiable, anonymous. But remember: this town is the facade for a Communist encampment. Jack Webb is right: “Appearances *are* deceptive.”

Amid this opening barrage of upside-down images, Webb sorts out the truth and puts us at ease, much like a CBS correspondent reporting from the confused war front. Webb's voice is guttural and his eyes are as unwavering as a sergeant's stare. His hair is close-cropped and shaped into military regulation. He is the ultimate TV cop, Badge 714, and he stands strong for law and order. We have just seen a communist town, he tells us. Now it's time to see a real American town.

This is Midtown, *another* anonymous town, which also could be in Iowa, California or Tennessee. It has the same drugstore and malt shop, the college campus and the Protestant church. It is also the home of RED NIGHTMARE's hero, Jerry Donovan. Jerry is married and has three lovely children. His biggest problem is choosing between stew and hamburger for his workingman's dinner. In his free time away from the machine shop, Jerry bowls on Wednesday evenings and has a serious relationship with the TV.

But Jerry also has a stubborn streak, an individuality bordering occasionally on the anti-social. For instance, he believes that PTA meetings are a waste of time and refuses to attend them. But more seriously, he squabbles with his eighteen-year-old daughter when she announces a plan that disagrees with him. “Bill and I want to get married,” she smiles. Mother is overjoyed, offering her congratulations easily; but Jerry is distressed. He feels that the couple should wait four or five years for wedlock. The daughter looks teary-eyed, her fiancé dissident. A pleasant evening has broken apart by an opposition as strong as the battering of two rams.

On this night Jerry does not sleep easily, and not just because of the evening arguments. Jack Webb approaches with a little devil in his throat. He says:

“Jerry Donovan in a few minutes will be asleep. Let's give Jerry a nightmare, a real, Red nightmare. Let's lift it out of the Soviet Union and superimpose it on Jerry's home town. We'll see how many freedoms Jerry loses when under Communist domination.”

An amorphous cloud, a pillar of smoke, some banal editing, and we are taken adrift. In Jerry's dream world, Midtown, U.S.A., is under Communist siege and subjugation. Yet poor Jerry remains strangely oblivious to the change until almost all of his precious freedoms vanish away. All of a sudden, he needs a permit to telephone his wife. Armed guards patrol the streets -- in a frightful reenactment of the opening scene.

A fat commissar pulls his jeep up to a crowd gathered around the downtown park. The crowd listens intently. He advises,

“When the moral fiber of America weakens and the economics of competitive capitalism collapse, it will be your responsibility to purge the reactionary system and conform to the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Other parts of Jerry's orderly life have also been altered. Doting Mrs. Donovan has become a cybernaut, never betraying her wooden stare. Jerry's older daughter is forced away by brusque military police, as she has volunteered to attend a Workers' Agricultural School. Further, this daughter expresses no regret but mumbles something about the decaying family unit.

Even the younger Donovan scions are sapped-of-life Halloween goblins. They refuse to attend Sunday school but pack aggressively for their sojourn to a state-operated school. When Jerry desperately drags his children to the Presbyterian church, he finds it converted to a state museum. The curator is a squat man with a black moustache and black eyes and has a distinct resemblance to Stalin. Jerry's hostility finally is beyond control. He smashes a valuable museum piece to the floor, and he is hustled away by forceful guards.

Jerry's trial is a microcosm of Justice, Communist style. Jerry, the accused, is not even allowed a seat. He has no defense, no written indictment, only signed accusations, and a jury that looks like the decidedly unsympathetic front line of an opposition football team. They hulk impassively while the shrewd district attorney twists and molds the case. Jerry is convicted in this kangaroo court -- convicted of subversion, deviation, and treason. He lands in jail.

As in many famous Hollywood scenes, Jerry sits tied to a chair, with a pendant light swaying ominously across his eyes. A sadistic guard circles around, intimidating him to confess other names in the underground conspiracy. But Jerry refuses to squeal, maligns the Communist system for his Last Request. He is shot helplessly in the head to climax the Red Nightmare.

This dream narrative allows the Warners filmmakers to pile together every surrealistic stereotype of life under the Communist state. There is no bill of rights, no choice of religion -- no religion at all, no right against illegal searches, no freedom of speech and choice, no freedom to

criticize the state. Further, there is no civil law; the state decides who lives and dies.

The party members have no warmth, only a dedication to the ideal state; they are shiftless, pusillanimous, and petrified. The people under their domination are similarly cold, hypnotic, and unmerciful; they betray their husbands and send their children to labor camps. These Communists are unicellular; they only have one goal, to maintain the state while destroying the capitalist, bourgeois system.

Overcoming his dismal nightmare, Jerry awakens to Midtown morning. He marches down the staircase in high fashion, full of love and humanity. He kisses his wife as if the marriage ceremony were being reenacted. And Jerry now chooses detente in place of last night's stubbornness. After breakfast, Jerry meets with his daughter and her fiancé to discuss the marriage plans anew. It seems that Bill is joining the service, so the betrothal can be postponed for a *time*, though not quite for so long as originally proposed by Jerry. But a compromise is on hand, and Jerry Donavan is delighted with it.

Our hero has truly "awakened," for he knows the meaning of living freely without suppression. In the United States alone, this can be done. Jack Webb explains: "Freedom must be earned." With this knowledge, Jerry has become an American at last. He has returned from his "Mission to Moscow."

The last two minutes of RED NIGHTMARE contains another montage paean to U.S. freedoms: freedom to have simple pleasures, to educate, to vote, to come and go, to own property, to marry, to study and learn, to have a career, to speak. It is the freedom found in the hypnotic, star-spangled music that sounds the very last shot: grinning militia men of every uniform walking arm in arm down the steps of the nation's capital. A hundred versions of Bill, Jerry's future son-in-law. The United States' future.

In 1975 RED NIGHTMARE seems, of course, a stupid and silly film, but it is too important a document to banish to the vaults of the Congressional Library. It should be watched and recalled as a statement from Warner Brothers Studio and as a personal project of Jack L. Warner. Surely it is easy to sentimentalize Warners for I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG, CASABLANCA, and other commendable political works. But just as surely RED NIGHTMARE was not a dream in the Warners repertoire.

## Notes

[1.](#) Leo C. Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, The Movie Makers*, p. 145.

[2.](#) Ibid p. 152.

[3.](#) Reid Rosefelt, "Celluloid Sedition? The Strange Case of the Hollywood

Ten,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 11, Testimony from the Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, Eighteenth Congress, 1947, p. 8.

4. *Take One*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Testimony from the House Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, Eightieth Congress, 1947, p. 8.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

6. According to THE SELLING OF THE PENTAGON, the CBS documentary, RED NIGHTMARE was the most ambitious of the Department of Defense films. However, many other films were made in alliance with the Pentagon. Many of these shorts dealt with Vietnam; Jack Webb tells of the catastrophe resulting from a pullout of U.S. troops from Indochina in THE ABANDONMENT OF VIETNAM. The late Chet Huntley, formerly of NBC news, narrates the film, THE AMERICAN NAVY IN VIETNAM. Another source of propaganda films arises from the threat of world Communist domination. Walter Cronkite, Mr. Twentieth Century, discusses the spread of Communism over Asia, Europe, and the United States in THE EAGLE TALON (1962). Not only will the earth become one Red stronghold, but James Cagney tells us that the moon, the planets, and even beyond will be controlled by Communists in ROAD TO THE WORLD. Some other films released through the Office of the Chief of Information are: WHY VIETNAM, RED CHINA'S BATTLE PLAN, COMMUNIST TARGET: YOUTH, OUTLOOK S.E. ASIA, THE COLD WAR, ALONE UNARMED.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## Interview with Julia Reichert and Jim Klein New Day's way

by Julia Lesage, Barbara Halpern Martineau,  
and Chuck Kleinhans

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 21-22

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

New Day Films is a cooperative distribution group for feminist films, and it has been remarkably successful in creating an alternative for politically committed filmmakers. To find out more about New Day, we interviewed two of its founders—Julia Reichert and Jim Klein, who made *GROWING UP FEMALE* (1971) and *METHADONE* (1974, see review and interview in JUMP CUT 5).

KLEINHANS: What is New Day, and how did it get started?

REICHERT: New Day is now a cooperative for feminist films, run by the filmmakers. It really started with *GROWING UP FEMALE*, with that one film. That's because Jim and I made it in 1971 to be used by the women's movement, by organizers, by consciousness raising groups, and for outreach to get new women in the women's movement. So it was very much an organizing film. When we realized it was a good film -- which was about a year after it was finished and we saw it could be used all over the country, then came distribution.

So what did we do? We went to New York. And I carried the film around and showed it to various distributors like Grove Press, McGraw Hill, and so forth. Then they started showing us contracts. We realized we'd be signing away control of the film for 7 years and only get 25-30%. And they'd see the film, and it was clear they weren't in it for the same reason we were. We asked them what would happen if a movement group wrote and said they didn't have enough money for the rental. The distributors said, "Too bad, they'd have to get the money." It was really wrong. We'd heard about independent distribution in England, so we decided to try to distribute it ourselves.

LESAGE: What about cooperative distribution at that time?



REICHERT: The Filmmaker's Coop was so into underground and experimental film that we could see our potential audience would never get that catalogue.

MARTINEAU: And Newsreel?

REICHERT: Newsreel didn't want the film. Actually I should say New York Newsreel. The women in New York Newsreel reacted very strongly against it. Later a lot of other Newsreel groups picked it up.

KLEIN: Every single Newsreel but New York carried it. But when it first came to a national decision, the other Newsreels hadn't seen it and took New York Newsreel's word.

REICHERT: Actually when we thought of national distribution at first, we thought of Newsreel. That was the highest aspiration we had. And there was American Documentary Films, too, but we'd heard bad things about them. So, it became clear we'd have to do it ourselves. At that point we had no money at all. We were still in college and Jim had a year to finish. So, we had to go into debt. It is quite expensive to distribute by yourself. Of course everyone said "Forget it, you'll lose your shirts."

LESAGE: When was that?

REICHERT: We decided in spring of '71 and the first mailing went out that fall.

LESAGE: That was the red and blue poster.

REICHERT: Yes.

LESAGE: I remember because we put it on our kitchen wall.

REICHERT: In fact Jim and I printed that ourselves. We learned how to run a press to do it and save money.

KLEIN: It was a terrible old movement press. We ran 15,000.

LESAGE: Where did you send it? Ours came to the women's house in Bloomington.

REICHERT: We learned all these things like where do you get lists. A lot of names came from contacts because I traveled around a lot that spring with the film and just asked everybody (like I was doing last night at the showing of METHADONE) for names and addresses of people who might want to use it: teachers, women's centers, and what not. I went to different women's publications and asked for lists. Basically I was trying to get a list of the women's movement. We typed the whole thing up and also bought some college lists, like of the sociology departments at every college in the country. Then we had friends and students help us stuff them and lick them. We did it ourselves and had boxes full of them all over our apartment. I guess you have some idea of that with JUMP CUT.

It's like sending out a net. You don't know what you'll get. So we started getting replies, rentals, preview requests, mail. The ten prints we had were booked up right away and we had to get five more. That's when our lab bills started getting really high and we didn't have any money to pay them. You have to count on that, that you'll lay out a lot of money before any will start coming in. We were lucky because the guy who ran the lab liked us and the film, and he tolerated us not paying right away.

LESAGE: That mailing came at the right time because I was sort of the film person in the women's movement in a university town and the poster was sent over to my house. I liked the poster so I put it up. I remember all that year I'd be getting phone calls about films for women's events and I'd keep recommending GROWING UP FEMALE because I had the poster up, even though at first I hadn't seen the film. I think your film got its greatest exposure then in the school year '71-'72. After that other films started coming in and GROWING UP FEMALE went on to a different audience than just campuses. When did it start reaching a larger group of people?

REICHERT: In '71-'72 we were getting 30-40 bookings a month, but that was Harvard, Brandeis, Vassar, and women's centers. The next year we started noticing Y's and churches, nursing schools, technical schools.

KLEIN: Now it's not many Eastern colleges, but junior colleges, catholic high schools ...

LESAGE: In Chicago people get it from the public library.

MARTINEAU: In Toronto, too.

REICHERT: That's the best way because then people can get it for free. It's no hassle for us.

MARTINEAU: How much do you sell prints to libraries for?

REICHERT: \$375.

MARTINEAU: Is there a different price for women's groups?

REICHERT: Well, we've sold it to movement groups for \$200-250. We usually sell them a slightly used print: one that's been out a few times but is still perfectly good. We have a sliding scale on rentals too. The whole first year we were distributing, we made hardly any sales.

KLEIN: One. The New York Public Library saw it and immediately bought it on the third day we took it around.

REICHERT: And we previewed like mad. We'd call these libraries up and go out there.

LESAGE: Libraries have only bought women's films in the last year here in Chicago.

REICHERT: Back then these male librarians would say “We're not interested in the subject of women.” Really that out-and-out! It was just infuriating,

KLEIN: Or they would get together a screening committee of professional women.

REICHERT: And they'd say, “Oh, you're just showing these down-and-out women who don't have the sense to do anything with their lives anyway.” So what we'd have to do basically is convince them of the worth of the women's movement. We'd have to argue feminist politics with them. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn't. But what started happening after a while was that the movement and the film became better known and more accepted.

The first six months, from fall '71 to spring '72, it was just Jim and I, but then we realized it would make sense to have other women do the same thing with us. We could share mail costs and tasks.

We met Amalie Rothschild; in fact we lived in her apartment in New York for two months. She's very nice and interested in film and in film distribution. Amalie had just finished *IT HAPPENS TO US*. She also had *WOO WHO? MAY WILSON*. And we saw Liane Brandon's *ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE*, which she was distributing herself. So we drove up to Boston to see her. And we talked to her for a couple of days. She agreed to give the idea of cooperative distribution a try. So that's when we started New Day Films. All four of us gradually ironed out the natural problems that arose.

LESAGE: You decided it would be a coop for filmmakers and you wouldn't just be a distributor of women's films.

KLEIN: That came partly from the idea that filmmakers should distribute their films: particularly political filmmakers, in order to know their audiences, to complete the process. Making the film is just the first part. We met a lot of independent filmmakers in New York who were very isolated from the world and never saw their audience.

REICHERT: It's very much a political decision to see filmmaking that way, as a process that includes the audience.

KLEIN: Yes. And it's a hard decision because it means making less films. It means the filmmaking process is more than getting an idea, getting money and finishing a film. It means doing that and then going a step farther.

LESAGE: But isn't that a high for you?

KLEIN: Definitely.

REICHERT: Yes. It means a tremendous amount to get letters from so many of the people who have used our films, to get their responses and ideas. And also to be able to talk with people before they show a film to

suggest discussion questions or to adjust the rental price to their ability to pay. Or to watch, year by year, how the audience for a film changes. I've come to realize that a lot of people aren't into that. I used to be more judgmental about it. I used to feel any filmmaker, particularly a political filmmaker, who didn't want to distribute was just off the wall. But now I see some people aren't into office work and keeping a schedule, and I guess I have to respect that.

KLEINHANS: What about the mechanical end of handling films and mailings?

REICHERT: There are places that do warehousing. They keep all your prints, clean and hotsplice them, make bookings by phone and mail, send confirmations, send bills, and send you a copy so you know who's getting it. That makes it possible for us. Otherwise we'd be running to the post office and doing all the paperwork. Ours is called Transit Media in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, and they're really good. For mailing lists you have to psych out what your potential audience will be. Also you can decide to reach an audience if you want. At one point we decided to try women's prisons so we did a mailing and got a fair response. Of course we showed the films for free. That's the kind of control you have with your own distribution.

LESAGE: What about audience? Did the people in New Day have the same interest in audience you did?

REICHERT: After a year of it being the four of us we decided to expand. We started screening films and everyone had to agree on a film before the coop could accept it. We saw JOYCE AT 34 by Joyce Chopra and Claudia Weill and really liked it. We also felt good about the two filmmakers. So in 1973 Joyce and Claudia became New Day members. Now we have the new films of Amalie and Liane's NOT SO YOUNG NOW AS THEN.

At our January 1975 coop meeting we made what Jim and I feel was a really significant decision. We decided to accept a film by and about men into New Day. This came out of several discussions in the past year about our definition of a "feminist film." What we as filmmakers are trying to do is see that sexism affects everyone and how it is related to the social, economic and political institutions that affect all people. We all feel now that feminism encompasses more than "women's issues." So, the film MEN'S LIVES made perfect sense as a feminist film.

KLEIN: The question of more men in New Day also required lots of discussion. It will be interesting to see how this affects the coop in the months to come. At our last coop meeting we accepted three new films -- a real record for us. This came after very lengthy discussion of expanding the size of the coop. These films were YUDIE by Mirra Bank, CHRIS AND BERNIE, by Bonnie Friedman and Deborah Shaffer, and UNION MAIDS by us and Miles Mogulseque.

MARTINEAU: Have you been looking for more films? What kind of

criteria do you have?

KLEIN: We don't have any rigid criteria. That's a hassle at times because people in the coop come from different places politically and have different political and technical standards. I think that what we've come to is that first of all a film has to have a feminist consciousness in one way or another. It has to deal with a feminist issue. Films made by women on any subject, or even made about women, aren't necessarily part of what we're doing if they don't have a feminist analysis. They also have to have a broad enough appeal that they can be successful as a mass film and not just within the women's movement.

REICHERT: They have to have some technical proficiency, but the coop isn't into saying a film has to be extremely polished.

MARTINEAU: Would you take a fiction film?

KLEIN: Sure. ANYTHING YOU WANT TO BE is a fiction film. It's really based on how useful a film can be. That's obviously a political and partly personal judgment. Also we don't just sit in a screening room and decide. People in the coop take it out and show it to classes, women's centers, and other groups and get reactions.

REICHERT: We really check it out because we don't trust our sensibilities alone. The other half of the decision is the filmmaker, who has to be someone we can work with and we feel is going to be responsible.

MARTINEAU: Has anyone challenged you about men in a feminist cooperative, from a separatist view?

REICHERT: Not really.

MARTINEAU: What happens when you take New Day films around?

REICHERT: You see changes, both individually and in groups. I remember I was showing films at an all women's group and afterwards a woman came up to me who was a Bell Telephone operator. She'd had no contact with the women's movement and had been dragged to the screening by a friend. She came up to me afterwards with this beautiful look on her face, like she'd just realized something. And she said, "I never realized that the women's movement was about change and politics." She was a working woman and had never seen any connection between herself and the women's movement. It was very clear she'd seen herself in the films.

The other thing that's very exciting is when a program of women's films is a catalyst in a community. I'd show a series of films and afterwards we'd talk about the films and the local situation. You'd see people groping and excited—women who hadn't met before talking for hours and then deciding to meet again. Consciousness raising groups, women's centers, and all kinds of activities around the country started

with films being a catalyzing force.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

### Anatomy of a blaxploitation theater

by Demetrius Cope

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 22-23

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

In spring 1975, I did some field research on black movies as part of my studies at Livingston College, Rutgers University. I interviewed the manager of a movie house specializing in blaxploitation films, and 150 people at five distinctly different theaters about their reactions to black films. Although the sampling of my survey was far too small to be sociologically valid, from the experience I was able to arrive at some tentative generalizations which in turn could be used for a more rigorous research project.

The theater I was most interested in understanding was the International Cinema Theater, located on Albany Street in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Located in a predominantly working class black community, the audience is almost exclusively working class and poverty level blacks. The manager was very cooperative in giving me an interview. Before working in New Brunswick for the past year, he had managed a movie house in Brooklyn for 25 years. According to him, the International is a "specialized" theater, catering to a distinct segment of the mass audience, in this case blacks. Describing the audience as young, he said most of them are from lower class families and single. Few families attend the International. He believed that some of the young people mimic the films and act out a similar violence on the street. However, you'll never know, he said, the full impact of a movie "unless you follow the individual home," where you can observe actions behind closed doors.

Q: Would blacks in this area pay to see white movies?

A: Films of a black nature are made on a low budget, therefore the theater can compensate by charging lower admission. Black films of the past had a limited audience because blacks didn't have enough money. Therefore, they weren't able to get out to see these movies. If I show *THE STING* or *THE GREAT GATSBY*, I won't make a nickel through this theater.

Q: What values or images do these black films project?

A: They don't do anything for the image one way or another, except films like CLAUDINE. Fred Williamson, Pam Grier and people like that are trying to get away from meaningless pictures. The pictures' impact is diluted because the kids are used to seeing sex and violence on the screen. It's nothing to them. I hope that they will get away from this type of garbage.

Q: Do the people in New Brunswick protest any of these black movies?

A: New Brunswick is not a very socially minded community. They have no CORE or NAACP or any organization as such which blacks would follow.

Q: Would you make any money now off of the early black films of the 70s?

A: MACK, SUPERFLY, and SHAFT would not sell at all if they ran again. Most of the black films today are good, commercial films, even though they are terribly low budget films.

He went on to explain that black people will pay to see violence before paying to see sex on the screen.

When I interviewed different audiences, I chose five distinctly different theaters. The Menlo Park Cinema is in a white middle class suburban shopping center; the Nassar Street is in Princeton, which caters to both the rich and to working class whites from Trenton. The Bleeker Street Cinema in New York City was chosen because it appealed to young, hip, white professionals and students. And I interviewed black students at Livingston College an evening of Black Pride Week during a triple feature of black movies.

The audience at the International in New Brunswick seemed to attend the movies more and more regularly than people in the other locations. Of the 30 interviewed, 10 said they went to the movies twice a month and 14 said they saw three or more shows a month: much higher than at the other locations. In terms of attending martial arts films and black films, the black audiences at the International and the Black Pride Week students responded significantly more favorably. The students were able to name more black films than the International's crowd, but both did better than the other audiences. Similar and predictable breakdowns were obvious in naming black performers. At the International, Pam Grier and Jim Kelly were mentioned, while at Nassar Street, Sidney Potier and Ossie Davis were known.

The most interesting response from the International was in reply to "what are your impressions of black movies?" I had four categorized responses: no impression, exploitive, realistic, and stereotyped. All the other groups interviewed happily responded to these categories. However at the International, although I know the people knew the



meaning of the categories, they responded with words expressing feelings, rather than categories. Typical replies were: “beautiful; corny; good, but immature; white wash; OK; all right; imitation of white films; terrific.”

From the period June 12, 1974 to May 13, 1975, the International Theater showed 32 black films, 27 general commercial films, and 27 martial arts films. For a two-month period (October 22 to December 28) there were no black films at all. The complete screening list follows below.

Obviously a much deeper study of audience attitudes is needed to do justice to the International’s audience and to understand what films they like and why and what kind of films they would enjoy which are not now being made, or shown in their area. One conclusion I believe I can safely make, however, is this: the International’s audience goes to the movies basically for entertainment. They mentioned both martial arts and non-violent movies as films they liked, and black films along with sex and comedy films. At the other locations the audiences named types of films which might be more highbrow—foreign, classics, satires, cultural, experimental—but they also mentioned entertainment films: love stories, monsters, westerns and gangsters. Actually I suspect that this may just mean that people at the other locations are more conscious of raising their taste for an interviewer (as they consistently raised their class position). The International audience, in contrast, is honest about its taste for movies that are above all entertaining.

### **Films screened:**

6/12-18 THE ARENA. SWEET SWEETBACK'S BADASSSS SONG

6/19-25 THE BLACK SIX. MAN CALLED SLEDGE

6/26-7/2 HANDS OF DEATH. MELODY JONES

7/3-9 BLACK VODOO EXORCIST. SCREAM BLOODY MURDER

7/10-16 TRUCK TURNER Co-feature (not known)

7/17-23 TOUGH. DOBERMAN GANG

7/24-30 BLACK EYE. EMPEROR OF THE NORTH

7/31-8/6 RETURN OF THE DRAGON. CHINESE HERCULES

8/7-13 GOLDEN NEEDLES. BARON BLOOD

8/21-27 THREE THE HARD WAY. FEARLESS FIGHTERS

8/28-9/3 EDUCATION OF SONNY CARSON. SUPERFLY, T.N.T.

9/4-10 BLACK GODFATHER. AFRICA BLOOD & GUTS (AFRICA ADDIO)

9/11-17 TOGETHER BROTHERS. LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE

9/18-24 POLICE WOMEN. KUNG FU MAMA

9/25-10/1 SAVAGE SISTERS. KARATE KILLER

10/2-8 UPTOWN SATURDAY NIGHT. CHINESE PROFESSIONALS

10/9-15 BLACK SAMSON. BLOOD ON THE SUN

10/16-22 CLAUDINE. BLIND MAN

10/23-29 CAGED HEAT. WOMEN IN CAGES

10/30-11/4 TONG FATHER. FORCED TO FIGHT

11/5-12 STING OF DRAGON MASTERS. ATTACK OF KING FU GIRLS

11/13-19 NIGHT OF THE STRANGLER. WOMEN AND BLOODY TERROR. NIGHT OF BLOODY HORROR

11/20-26 LAST DAYS OF MAN ON EARTH. FANTASTIC PLANET

11/27-12/3 GREEN HORNET. BUSTING

12/4-10 TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE. MAD MOVIE MAKERS

12/11-18 THE FAMILY. BIG BAD MAMA

12/19-24 AMAZING GRACE. HICKEY & BOGGS

12/25-30 AMAZING GRACE. Co-feature (not known)

12/31-1/7 BLACK DRAGON. SHAFT IN AFRICA

1/8-14 THE KLANSMAN. THUNDERFIST

1/15-21 TRIAL OF BILLY JACK. HAMMER OF GOD

1/22-28 MACON COUNTY LINE. DILLINGER

1/29-2/4 TAKING OF PELHAM 123. DUEL OF IRON FISTS

2/5-11 BLACK HOOKER. TRICK BABY

2/12-18 ABBY. FOXY BROWN

2/19-25 ABBY. FOXY BROWN

2/26-3/4 BOSS NIGGER. INVISIBLE FISTS

3/5-11 THE DRAGON DIES HARD. THREE THE HARD WAY

3/12-18 WOMAN HUNT. CASTLE OF FU MANCHU

3/19-25 STREET FIGHTER. HONG KONG CAT

3/26-4/1 T.N.T. JACKSON. QUEEN BOXER

4/2-8 ENTER THE DRAGON. FIVE FINGERS OF DEATH

4/9-15 BLACK GESTAPO. TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

4/16-22 DRAGON SQUAD. BLOOD FINGERS

4/23-29 BLACK CONNECTION. SHANGHAI KILLERS

4/30-5/6 STUD BROWN. BLACK GODFATHER

5/7-13 REVOLT OF THE DRAGON. THAT MAN BOLT

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Tudor's *Theories of Film*  
“What’s for dinner?”  
“The same old thing.”  
“Yuk!”

by William Rothman

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, p. 25

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

*Theories of Film*, Andrew Tudor. (NY: Viking, Cinema One Series, 1974) \$3.25, paper.

Books concerning film theory tend to take one of two forms. The first is writing which presents itself as constituting a theory of film, however it construes that notion [e.g., Kracauer's *Theory of Films*, Arnheim's *Film as Art*, Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*]. The second is anthologies of theoretical pieces or excerpts, with introduction and blurb about each piece [e.g., Mast and Cohen's *Film Theory and Criticism*, Lewis Jacobs' anthologies].

Andrew Tudor's *Theories of Film* presents itself both as a survey of significant film theories, and as a piece of theory in its own right. But the object of Tudor's theorizing is not so much film as film theory itself. It is at one level conceived as a contribution to a “theory of film theory,” intended to help raise film theory to a state of self awareness which might assure it a productive future.

The book's argument can be summarized. It begins with an introductory chapter, which attempts to define what is meant by “theory of film.” Tudor argues that it is essential to observe the distinction between theoretical work which aims primarily at expanding knowledge of the medium's empirical operation through constructing scientific models, from theoretical work which is intended primarily to articulate a film *aesthetic*. The implications of this distinction call for revisions in the history of film theory.

A chapter on Eisenstein follows. Tudor feels that Eisenstein has been misunderstood as primarily elucidating and advocating a montage aesthetic. For Tudor, Eisenstein is less a figure in the realism vs.

formalism debate than the man responsible for the “great beginning” in attempting to create a science of film language. Eisenstein fails, however, to confront the problem of the relation between film’s formal language and film’s social and psychological context (in part because of an uncritical Pavlovian psychology, Tudor claims).

This judgment brings Tudor to a chapter-length consideration of the implications of John Grierson’s work. Eisenstein failed to take context seriously in developing his models of film language. At the opposite pole, Grierson dedicated himself to a cinema in which aesthetic formal considerations would be not merely conditioned by contextual assumptions about the social and psychological role of cinema, but *dominated* by a particular envisioned social function. Tudor argues that Grierson’s work illuminates the task of constructing a model which strikes the right balance between a “context free” essentialist impulse and a “context dominated” impulse to replace aesthetic argument by a discourse conducted entirely in social/ psychological terms.

The next chapter is called “The Aesthetics of Realism: Bazin and Kracauer.” Tudor is sympathetic to Kracauer’s desire to formulate a consistent aesthetic system, but argues that Kracauer is hopelessly confused and in any case perpetually hedging his bets (seesawing on the question of whether “realism” involves *being* real in a certain sense or only *appearing* real). Among Kracauer’s assumptions which Tudor cannot accept is one that Kracauer shares with Bazin. An essentialist approach posits that a medium has a “nature”—in film’s case, a photographic nature which determines its “natural affinity” with recording and revealing reality. Tudor cannot accept this non-social aesthetic of the “real.” He sees in both Kracauer and Bazin a combination of positivism and romantic faith in nature, which is in any case ultimately anti-cinematic.

Tudor thinks that Bazin is as confused as Kracauer, although Bazin’s confusion is less obvious because he never tries to be as systematic as Kracauer, and because he possesses far greater sensitivity to cinema. Tudor argues that there is a contradiction between Bazin’s earlier and later writings (and in part within the writings of each period) which Bazin never acknowledges. Bazin starts out—and part of him remains—a “pure” realist. He then becomes—but not consistently—a “spatial” realist. This is the split between “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (where Bazin claims for the film image a direct ontological bond with the “reality” from which it is forged) and the later “Theater and Cinema” (where the claim is modified: what film image and “reality” share is the fundamental attribute of spatial/ temporal unity). It is also the split between the idea that Expressionism is the enemy and the idea that montage is the real enemy.

According to Tudor, the realist aesthetic declined with the decline of Italian neorealism.

“If the realist aesthetic systems and the textbook grammars have gone, what has filled the vacuum? ... What are the

theoretical assumptions of most contemporary practice? In short, where if anywhere are we headed? ... The easiest point of entry into such a discussion, lacking a systematized perspective, is through the critical 'language' thrown up by contemporary practices. In particular, two terms—*auteur* and *genre*."

Tudor argues that there has been no such thing as an "auteur theory." The notion of "auteur" has led some critics to a cult of personality rather than a consistent aesthetic. The notion is best thought of as a principle of sympathetic descriptive analysis, rather than as a source of critical evaluation. (The working hypothesis of auteurism: assume that the director "creates his films on the basis of a central structure.") This principle remains at the level of *pre*-theory, and brings us back to the need for models of film language.

"Ultimately, the sorts of questions suggested by the auteur principle can only be answered through detailed and systematic knowledge of the workings of film. To look at films as the work of an auteur involves close textual analysis rather than brief critical comment. Unfortunately, we are still not entirely sure of the language in which the text is written. Auteur directs our attention back to these concerns."

The notion of *genre* likewise raises fundamental issues involving the methodology of descriptive analysis, which in turn raise theoretical issues. In particular, it returns us to the need for development of sociological and psychological theories of film which must interlock with the development of any general models of film language.

The book ends with a chapter titled "Epilogue." In it, Tudor expresses his conviction that top priority in film theory must be given at present to the development of detailed models of film language (which are attuned to the problem of context). For example, Tudor insists that a detailed theory of film language is a pre-condition of useful application of structuralist methods to film. And it is the pre-condition of meaningful consideration of such basic philosophical questions as "What is the nature of film?"

As a piece of theory, Tudor's book is open to radical criticism. For one thing, it offers virtually no positive insights into how theorists might go about developing a detailed model of film language. Indeed, Tudor is entirely vague as to what the process of constructing such a model, and the constructed model itself, might be like. He speaks of the "core problem" as one of "tapping the meaning of film." But he apparently thinks that "analyzing meaning" has nothing to do with actually determining the meanings of concrete films: as if the way in which a film is meaningful has nothing to do with its meaning. (He is mute on the subject of what it *might* have to do with.)

Tudor supposes that, in order to construct objective analytical descriptions of films, we need a language we do not possess, and that we

must first derive this language from models of film language that we likewise do not possess. Two conflicting objections suggest themselves. (a) We already possess models of film language: meaningful films themselves—which are ripe for analyses, which in turn might be used in increasing our understanding of what is involved in theorizing about film. (b) Film is in any case not a language. Fortunately, we do possess a language which we can use in constructing theoretically illuminating analytical/ descriptive accounts of films: *English*, supplemented by frame enlargements and a handful of technical terms.

If the above criticisms are rather obscurely stated, a related one can be put clearly: Tudor's is surely the only book of film theory which avoids making any substantial statement about film or films. In particular, Tudor reveals nothing about what he thinks of film that accounts for his conviction that theorizing about film might be a meaningful activity for us—contemporary political agents, among the other things we are—to engage in.

Then again, it is not at all clear what Tudor thinks or knows of the recent and contemporary film world. When he claims that the realistic aesthetic ebbed with Italian neorealism, he apparently feels no inclination to acknowledge the cinema vérité and "direct cinema" movements, nor to consider the work of, say, Godard and Straub. He does not acknowledge the existence of U.S. and European avant-garde film movements. He does not acknowledge the continuing struggles to develop a filmmaking practice grounded in Marxism. Nor does he acknowledge recent theoretical writing by, say, Stanley Cavell, Annette Michelson, Noel Burch, the recent Althusser- and Lacan-influenced French writing and its English and U.S. spinoffs, and so on. Unfortunately, anyone familiar with—or even interested in—recent discourse on film will find Tudor's argument and conclusions to be of virtually no interest.

Tudor's book is written in such a way that his aim of offering a "survey" of the field of film theory cannot be separated from the problematic theoretical strain that runs through the book. In part for this reason, the book cannot really be recommended as an introduction to film theory. Students would be far better off reading the "classic" texts, the anthologies, and the current magazines—and thinking and talking about the issues themselves.

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## *Psychoanalysis and film: an exchange*

In JUMP CUT 4 Julia Lesage critiqued the way some Freudian concepts were used in the special Brecht issue of *Screen* (15:2, Summer 1974). Lesage's article, "[The Human Subject—You, He, or Me? \(Or, the Case of the Missing Penis\)](#)," was reprinted in the Summer 1975 issue of *Screen*, on psychoanalysis and cinema, followed by a "Comment" from the authors of the articles Lesage criticized: Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath, and Cohn MacCabe. We are pleased to extend the discussion by reprinting the "Comment." It is followed by [Chuck Kleinhans' response](#) to Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe. —eds.

## Comment

by Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath, and  
Colin MacCabe

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 27-28

Julia Lesage's critique of the *Screen* special number on Brecht can be divided into three main areas of emphasis: 1. the proposal of orthodox 'Freudianism' as the trap into which contributors to that number have fallen; 2. the identification of a fundamental distortion of Barthes' *S/Z* in a previous editorial; 3. the objection to the use of the concept of fetishism in the course of discussions concerning representation. In what follows, an attempt will be made to look at these points of criticism in the interests of an understanding of the issues they raise, leaving aside the element of attack so pronounced in the overall development of the critique. If there are errors in our work, it may be that they stem from significant problems which, however inadequately for the moment, we are trying to resolve and which more 'rage' is unlikely to help us to clarify. Not primarily a 'reply,' the real ambition of this comment is thus the demonstration of these problems and hence of our theoretical tasks, of the situation of the work we are doing.

It is certain that *Screen* contributors refer to Freud and that this reference has been increasingly important over the last few numbers (as it will be, doubtless, over those to come). What is much less certain is the characterization of the reference in conjunction with the idea of a



monolithic 'orthodox Freudianism.' Evidently, the context and orthodoxy of psychoanalysis differ widely from continent to continent, from country to country; Lesage's American experience is not ours: in Britain, psychoanalysis has never known that massive socio-ideological expansion-in-exploitation and the initial intellectual enthusiasm for Freud lapsed after the war into stolid resistance broken occasionally by bursts of violent dismissal, psychoanalysis coming to represent, in every sense of the word, the *unspeakable*. More relevantly here, orthodoxy varies from school to school and from Association to Association (as well as within them): it is, in fact, precisely the current activity of the theoretical debate that is a major factor in our reference to psychoanalysis. The idea of the 'Freudian orthodoxy' is for us far from helpful (unless, the orthodoxy once having been specified as the social exploitation in ideology of 'vulgarized Freudian concepts,' its relations to Freud's scientific constructions are carefully examined—from which examination can *then* be posed the difficulties with regard to the implications of the former in the latter, the difficulties of the ideological investment in science, not simply in its use but also in its discourse) and appears to operate finally as a straight rejection of any practical consideration of Freud and psychoanalysis (which is to avoid the problems of investment and cast Freudian analysis as totally ideological, as furnishing no hold of knowledge).

As was said, we refer to Freud, to Freudian concepts, and it is here that those questions emerge which are central for the intelligibility of our work: why do we make this reference? what do we understand by psychoanalysis? The questions come together into one, and any answer at this stage can only be offered in acknowledging with Althusser that

“whoever wishes today to comprehend Freud's revolutionary discovery, at once recognize its existence and grasp its meaning, must, at the cost of great critical and theoretical effort, cross the vast terrain of ideological prejudice which separates us from Freud.”

The contours of that terrain are made dear in Lesage's critique and its pitfalls can no doubt be seen in the articles on Brecht: there is no ready way into some purity of discourse—only, as best we are able, critical and theoretical effort.

The texts against Freud and Freudianism from within the women's movement that Lesage cites may be legitimate protests against the oppression of women and its ideological justification by certain currents of Freudian thought, to be found even within Freud's own writing: but the quotations and references she assembles are beside the point. It makes no difference whether or no there is a homology between little boys' fantasies and certain concepts of psychoanalytic theory; a critique of that theory can only be based on an examination of how those concepts work within it. It was not Freud's intention to prescribe recipes for the maximum of sexual pleasure or to judge between the capacities of men and women, the different erotogenic zones or the various types

of object choice in this respect. 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman' (*Standard Edition*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 145-72) shows this clearly; it also shows that, without lapsing into notions of 'intersubjectivity,' Freud was quite capable of taking his patients' families and other social relations into account, both insofar as patients bring them into analysis directly, and insofar as special issues are raised when it is the patients' families' desires rather than the patients' own that lead them into analysis in the first place. All these arguments have been more than adequately dealt with by Juliet Mitchell in her *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (now available as a Pelican paperback). Here we need only concentrate on two points. First, the incompatibility of the different authorities she cites. Various kinds of Freudian revisionism, the 'existentialist psychoanalysis' of Laing, already much more remote from the psychoanalytic tradition, and the 'sexology' of Masters and Johnson cannot be synthesized into any coherent position from which it would be possible to move from a protest against oppression to the knowledge of that oppression which is also a precondition (but not the only or the first one) of its removal. Second, the position that does tie together this assemblage of contradictory anti-Freudianisms, and also Lesage's refusal of one of the central theses of the Brecht issue of *Screen* which she so ably summarizes, is the desire for a social practice that will give as much sanction to the 'feminine' as it does to the 'masculine.' But her formulation of the desire presupposes the natural pre-existence of masculine and feminine subjects: what she really rejects in Freud is the thesis of bisexuality. As one of us wrote in a related connection in *Screen* 16:1, Spring 1975, p. 133, this formulation

"entails the position that there is a definitely defined male sexuality which can simply find expression and also an already existent female sexuality which simply lacks expression."

She presumes that the oppression of women, or rather of 'femininity,' is only the secondary 'conditioning' of the feminine subject by discriminatory law and education reinforced by ideological institutions such as psychoanalytic practice, and even film criticism. Our articles in the Brecht issue and since may argue that this oppression is more deeply rooted, but this implies neither that we assume a monolithic masculine subject, nor that we are reconciled to an ineradicable inferiority of women.

In this connection, a note might be inserted here in respect of the linguistic sexism of *Screen* contributors as manifested in the use made of 'he' as the pronoun for the term 'subject.' The criticism as made is both right and wrong: right, because language weighs with a pressure that only the vigilance of others can help us to "determine; wrong, because the problem is more complex than the expression it receives: all that is achieved by substituting 'people' for 'he' is a collapse into an essentialism of the person (the expunging, that is, of the whole reality of the psychoanalytic intervention); in fact, what is probably needed in English is a movement between 'it,' the subject in psychoanalysis, male

and female (remember the importance of the thesis of bisexuality), and the subject defined as exchange value in the ideological assignation of discourse in so far as this is the positioning of a 'masculinity' in which 'femininity' is placed and displaced ('masculinity' and femininity,' and this is precisely that importance of the bisexuality thesis, being the blocking opposition of a process that escapes it on the 'body of each individual); such positioning is effective in the structures of representation with which the Brecht articles dealt—whence the tendency towards 'he' (more correctly, therefore, '[s]he').

Let us come back to the questions of the reference to psychoanalysis. By psychoanalysis, we understand a science whose specific object is the unconscious and its formations, and which, as such, is a necessary component of historical materialism in the knowledge it produces of the construction of the subject:

“the unconscious is a concept forged on the trail of what operates to constitute the subject” (Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris 1966; all subsequent quotations are from this work).

The orthodoxy' to which we refer is thus that which can be grasped in Freud's writings *in this perspective* and this perspective has been focused above all in Lacan's restitution of Freudian analysis as 'materialist theory of language,' of the 'talking cure' (Anna O's description of the treatment Breuer created with her and which Freud was so radically to develop) as the attention brought to bear on the positions of the subject in the symbolic. To refuse to pose the instance of the subject is to fall into idealism (the unity of consciousness as the founding disposition of the world) or its crude 'materialist' counterpart (the subject-atom). Hence our attempt to think this instanced to articulate the process of the subject within historical materialism, and our reference to psychoanalysis as science of this articulation.

What does all this have to do with film? As a step towards an answer, two things may be stressed. Firstly, there is a need to mark out a distance from traditional notions of 'applying' psychoanalysis to film: as science psychoanalysis is not to be applied 'from outside,' so to speak, to accepted fields of interest: it cuts across, largely and differently, those fields, constituting new 'objects,' new points of interrogation. The problem is to understand the terms of the construction of the subject and the modalities of the replacement of this construction in specific signifying practices, where 'replacement' means not merely the repetition of the place of that construction but also, more difficultly, the supplantation—the overplacing: supplementation or, in certain circumstances, supplantation (critical interruption)—of that construction in the place of its repetition. For example (an example which extends a remark made in another context by Christian Metz in his article): there is a relation between mirror phase and cinematic institution that should be examined. yet the condition of such an examination is exactly the non-reduction of the relation: nothing is to be gained by describing cinema as the mirror-phase, the crux is the

*relation*, that is, the difference, the supplacement—refiguration of a subject-spectator who has already completed the mirror-phase; it is the figure of the subject as turning-point (*circulation*) between image and industry (poles of the cinematic institution) which demands study. Our hypothesis, therefore, is that a crucial—determining—part of the functioning of ideological systems is the establishment of a series of machines (institutions) which *move*—placing of desire—the subject (‘sender’ and ‘receiver’) in an appropriation of the symbolic into the imaginary (the definition of miscognition). When we talked of representation (the exhaustion of the heterogeneity of the process of the subject in the symbolic) and used the concept of fetishism (the denial of work: that is, of heterogeneity and process) to identify its mechanism, we were tentatively beginning to explore this hypothesis, offering a point from which it could be formulated.

Secondly, as was briefly indicated above, the justification of a materialist theory of language is its attention to the passage of the subject in the symbolic, a subject radically excentric to the chain in which it never ceases to insist in the intermittence of the signifying elements—thus

“a signifier represents a subject for another signifier” (p. 840).

Linguistically, this slide can be seized in the disjunction of the *sujet de l'énoncé*, and the *sujet de l'énonciation*. In the utterance ‘I am lying,’ for example, it is evident that the subject of the proposition is not one with the subject of the enunciation of the proposition and vice versa; the ‘I’ cannot lie on both planes at once (dream, lapsus and joke are so many disorders of the regulation of these planes, of the exchange between subject and signifier). From here (and Freud himself alludes to this turning division when he compares the multiple appearance of the ego in a dream with anaphoric pronominalisation in such sentences as “When I think what I've done to this man”), the question can be posed as to the foundation of knowledge in the homogeneity of the self-reflexive consciousness, a question to which the discovery of the unconscious replies by the demonstration of division, of a work, of the *constitutive* impossibility of a cohesion between *énoncé* and *énonciation* as the simple identity of the subject:

“The only homogenous function of consciousness is the imaginary capture of the ego by its specular reflection and the function of miscognition which rests attached to it” (p. 832).

Question and reply are vital for what is at stake is the opening of theory to the very force of the articulation of desire: the unconscious is not there as the term of some primitive desire or instinct trying to break through into the higher level of consciousness; rather it is desire that is the term of the unconscious, of the entry into the symbolic, into language which escapes the subject in its structure and effects, something in language which is beyond consciousness and where the function of desire can be located. Divided in the passage into and in

language (nothing to do with the existential anguish of the 'divided self': the division is formative; not to recognize this is, precisely, fetishism), the subject moves across the discursive play of consciousness and unconscious, image and letter ('material support that discourse borrows from language'), according to the determination of the lack (castration) in which it, the subject, is introduced, which it introduces the *manque-à-être* ('lack-in-being')—in which desire is inscribed: at the same time that the discourse figures the subject, the subject indexes the discourse as lack, the turning of desire:

“the drama of the subject in language is the experience of this *manque-à-être* ... it is because it fends off this moment of lack that an image takes up the position of bearing the whole cost of desire: projection, function of the imaginary ... against this is set up in the very core of *l'être*, to indicate the gap, an index: introjection, relation to the symbolic ...” (p 655).

The basis of the psychoanalytic discovery is the articulation of the construction of the subject with regard to sexuality through the division of the entry into the symbolic and the disposition of real, imaginary and symbolic in this *process*. Crucial here is then the phallus:

“the phallus ... is the signifier of the very loss that the subject suffers by the discontinuity of the signifying” (p 715);

“it is at the moment when the subject passes from being to having in the quest for the phallus that is inscribed the *Spaltung* [splitting] by which the subject is jointed with the logos” (p 642).

In other words, the phallus is the signifier on which hinges the dependence of the access to genital sexuality with regard to a movement received as exclusion (from *being* the phallus):

“analysis reveals that the phallus has the function of the signifier of the *manque-à-être* which determines the subject's relation to the signifying” (p 710).

It is this function and determination for which the Oedipus provides a description.

It is this problem of description, of course, which causes all the difficulties of which the Lesage critique is one form of expression. Without in any sense entering into the detail of these difficulties, even less pretending to resolve them, it may be worthwhile making one or two remarks concerning their levels of pertinence since it is not always dear that these are grasped in their formulation. Thus, much confusion is created by the conflation of 'phallus' and 'penis' where the former is precisely the signifier of the term of the relation between mother and infant (boy or girl) which the Oedipus remodels in its translation from being to having the phallus. a translation potentially available in a

plurality of modes notwithstanding the blockage that the necessary interarticulation with a given set of social definitions may operate. The crux of psychoanalysis is not this or that definition but the difficult dialectic between being and having in the movement of need, demand and desire. If 'phallic' is *simply* made to mean 'masculine' and hence 'repressive,' and then pushed back onto psychoanalysis as a monolithic orthodoxy, it will be easy to dismiss Freud, but what gets dismissed along with this is, again, the whole question of the process of the subject. Nothing stops you criticizing Freudian constructions for example, the notion of 'penis-envy' but it is essential that in so doing the real issues should be seen—the issue of the desire of the mother in the register of being, the modalities of its conversion in a structure that may return the position of a 'penis-envy.' In this respect, the introduction of the idea of fetishism in the discussion of representation was exactly the exploration of a form of positionality; the effect of the argument was not to identify cinema and fetishism (so that the question is not one of endowing representations with penises) but to examine the positioning of object and subject in a pattern of disavowal, a certain structural security (even if the terms of the objection were to be accepted, its formulation would, therefore, still be wrong: it is the representation itself which is the endowment of the penis). This structure does not make us subjects, it places subjectivity: it effects an assignation of the subject in the imaginary, *captures* the subject in the coherence of an image, and the 'knowledge' of narrative is the mirror of that subject-image, the speculation of cinema. What remains unclear is the determination of the structure, the pull between the construction of the subject and the sociohistorical articulation of that construction (it is this determination that can be seen at work in the description of representation through fetishism as a masculine structure: woman has no place she is indeed the blind spot—other than as the object of this structure or as the assumption of the place of its subject (Sylvia Scarlett cutting off her own tresses to become the *hero* of Cukor's film)—which again is the confirmation of her objectality: the subject, male and female, is held in the distance of the structure, the aim of which is precisely the fixing of 'male' and 'female' as the full terms of a system of exchange, the reduction of difference in each individual into the straight social opposition 'masculine' / 'feminine'). We touch with this unclarity on a fundamental area of research which is only now beginning to be posed correctly; as Althusser puts it:

“How are we to think rigorously the relation between the formal structure of language, condition of the absolute possibility of the existence and intelligibility of the unconscious, the concrete structures of kinship and, finally, the concrete ideological formations through which are lived the specific functions (fatherhood, motherhood, childhood) implied in the kinship structures? can we conceive the historical variation of these last structures (kinship, ideology) as visibly affecting this or that aspect of the instance isolated by Freud?”

If we have no immediate answer, we are convinced nonetheless that the immediate dismissal of Freudian analysis is simply the foreclosure of these questions which it must be our critical and theoretical effort to re-find across the specific terms of our field of study: cinema. The discussion of representation was merely a start; it remains to develop the problems of that discussion—break down the notion of representation historically, pose in consequence the relations of language and positionality and its articulations, and from there the notion of a new language (that is, of a new practice of language), define the situation of cinema as superstructural institution, which may be, in the understanding of the metapsychological functioning of that institution (the relation between cinematic machine and construction of the subject—the supplacement), to come back critically on the use of the infrastructure/ superstructure model, examine cinematic practice in the play between image and text, its contradictions, its movement, its process, the computerization of the subject. Perhaps it can be added, as a coda, that this was the importance for us of Barthes' *S/Z* in its analysis of a classic text. Balzac's story *Sarrasine*, in which the symbolic irrupts into the imaginary 'figures' in the movement of the text (hence the panic, the disruption of the fixed positions of exchange, of the given images). The symbolic is here the *overturning* of representation, from theatre to the other scene of its production, the loss of the ease of fetishism (in Balzac, to buy a theatre ticket is to buy a woman's body). *S/Z* seemed—and seems—to us a fundamental attention (an analytic patience) to this and the redefinition of 'theory and method of literary analysis' *accordingly*.

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## *Psychoanalysis and film: an exchange*

In JUMP CUT 4 Julia Lesage critiqued the way some Freudian concepts were used in the special Brecht issue of *Screen* (15:2, Summer 1974). Lesage's article, "[The Human Subject—You, He, or Me? \(Or, the Case of the Missing Penis\)](#)," was reprinted in the Summer 1975 issue of *Screen*, on psychoanalysis and cinema, followed by a "Comment" from the authors of the articles Lesage criticized: Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath, and Cohn MacCabe. We are pleased to extend the discussion by reprinting the "[Comment](#)." It is followed by Chuck Kleinhans' response to Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe. —eds.

## A ventriloquist psychoanalysis

by Chuck Kleinhans

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 30-32

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

"By displacements and sublimations of various kinds, fixation upon one of the prototypical oral modes may develop into a whole network of interests, attitudes, and behaviors ... Repressed oral wishes may appear in disguised form. A person may become interested in linguistics, collect bottles, or learn ventriloquism."

—Calvin Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology*

Because it has provided valuable translations of European articles, advanced new topics in film discussion, and raised the level of Anglo-American film theory substantially, *Screen* is the most important British film publication. Because it is very influential in developing a new film criticism, when *Screen* begins to promote psychoanalysis as a new critical tool, the topic demands attention.

Of course there is considerable diversity among the critics associated with *Screen*. In the Summer 1975 issue, the editorial notes that *Screen*'s editorial board is not unified in approving of all the articles. At the same time, given internal diversity, there can be no question that "the *Screen* group" exists. *Screen* has been a rallying point for younger British critics interested in semiology and Marxism and consecutive issues show a



continuity of interest and intent. The aim of *Screen*'s most recent work was clearly stated in their editorial in the Spring 1974 issue. They are attempting to answer the most debated and central question of radical and Marxist film theory at present—the question of ideology and film. Their interest in psychoanalysis grows out of an attempt to deal with the nature of ideology.

#### THE NORTH ATLANTIC CONNECTION

“If you get into trouble with an American who is an intellectual, one question you ask him: who is your psychoanalyst? He will be very embarrassed, or he will tell you straightaway, and you and he are friends.” —C.L.R. James, *Modern Politics: Lectures at the Trinidad Public Library*

Different national situations partially shape any film discussion between the English and Americans. Because the differences give a context, it's useful to point them out, even though this understanding may have nothing to do with deciding on the validity of various positions.

Most importantly, there is a distinct difference between the U.S. and English approaches to the question of ideology and how it functions in culture. The U.S. critique of the dominant culture and its ideology has been principally raised by the opposition political groups which have emerged in the last 15 years: the movements of black and other racial/national minorities, women, gay men and lesbians, students, and the counterculture. Additionally, the anti-imperialist movement and the U.S. left have contributed to the critique, which has been tied to practical activity. Theoretical understanding of ideology has been underdeveloped: Marcuse's pessimistic *One-Dimensional Man* is probably the only widely read work on ideology, though in recent years other left perspective have been introduced (Gramsci, Althusser, etc.).

In contrast, theory predominates in the development of a radical British film criticism. Attempting to go beyond an established liberal and left-liberal position on culture, *Screen* has been oriented to recent French theory: the left film magazines *Cahiers du cinema*, and *Cinéthique*, Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (Ben Brewster, the current editor of *Screen*, has translated Althusser), and non-Marxists such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, etc.. English radical cultural thought tends to critique ideology in explicitly class terms with a strong theoretical underpinning.

The British and Americans differ substantially with regard to left political work in institutions. The English accept working within the British Film Institute and the Society for Education in Film and Television (the publisher of *Screen*), in an effort to move them left. And, in fact, they have succeeded in doing so. In contrast, it's hard to imagine an U.S. leftist thinking seriously of working in the American Film Institute, the University Film Association, or *Film Quarterly* and expecting to move them significantly leftward.

In very general terms then, in developing a radical film criticism, the British tend to work within established institutions, have a deeper theoretical foundation and pay more attention to class and Marxist interpretation than the Americans, who tend to work with alternative institutions (*Cineaste*, *Women and Film*, *JUMP CUT*), and have closer ties to active political practice, and a broader view of factors such as sexism and racism which mediate the class nature of ideology.

Freud's very different reception in England and the United States adds another factor producing a difference in the discussion of film, ideology and psychoanalysis. As Julia Lesage pointed out in her critique of *Screen*, the U.S. reception of Freudian concepts has been pervasive, filtered through a massive critique, and heavily revised. The very recent introduction of serious Freud study in England seems strange to Americans, but the impact Freud is having in intellectual circles must be massive. Here in the United States, where psychology is a growth industry, where one of the most successful mass circulation middlebrow magazines is called *Psychology Today*, where a new laundry detergent is named "Ego," it is strange to find, for example, the word and concept "neurotic" is not in common British usage: someone is described as "terribly shy" or "very nervous." Thus a good deal of English Freudian thought must be taken in the context of its newness. Given decades of ignorance, it is easier to see how British intellectuals can uncritically accept Jacques Lacan's recasting of Freud in a Hegelian mold. Certainly refinements will have to be forthcoming.

#### THEORY: UNCONSCIOUS AND UNSELF-CONSCIOUS

"I'll letcha be in my dream  
If I can be in yours."  
—Bob Dylan

In the Summer 75 *Screen*, editorial board member Christine Gledhill reviews Peter Harcourt's book *Six European Directors* and begins by remarking about

"... *Screen's* contention that theoretical, critical and educational practices are virtually linked—that each produces and is reproduced by the others with crucial consequences for the ensuing film culture. These connections have for a long time been more a matter of conviction and assertion than of concrete analysis, but SEFT has produced *screen* in the belief that an intervention on the theoretical front was vital for the growth of a film culture in Britain."

This is a fair statement of *Screen's* intention and activity. But it sounds a bit odd to U.S. ears. There is no mention of filmmaking—commercial or independent or radical—and no mention of film distribution, exhibition, or attendance. (There is radical filmmaking and distribution-exhibition in England, but this apparently lies out of *Screen's* realm, by choice.)

Gledhill offers no political reason for the intervention on the level of theory. Actually there is a material basis for this choice, which is that a fair number of *Screen* theorists do not have substantial teaching experience; therefore, it's quite logical that they could "intervene" in the area of theory more easily than in the area of education.

Gledhill proceeds with a very negative critique of Harcourt's book, which also extends to Harcourt as a teacher. In part, Gledhill attacks Harcourt as representing a species of empiricism—relying on film as "experience" and on the "personal response" to film. Unfortunately, Gledhill is so anti-empiricist that her argument comes down to nearly libeling Harcourt as a repressive teacher—something that could only really be determined by (empirically) observing him teach and seeing the results of his teaching on students. This is a small example of *Screen*'s materialistically correct anti-empiricism falling into the trap of idealism because it postulates "theory" as an autonomous "practice," and "knowledge" as something apart from the material world. While Americans err in developing practice to the neglect of theory, *Screen* errs in the opposite direction: developing a left theory without substantial relation to left cinematic activity, including teaching, and left political practice. The very idea of a "theoretical practice" is an ingenious, but hardly Marxist, formulation. Marxists of all persuasions have always postulated the interdependence of theory and practice, without confusing the former as the latter.

A similar confusion about theory lies at the base of Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (U.S. pub. Random-Vintage), and since in their "Comment," Ben Brewster, Stephen Heath, and Cohn MacCabe take Mitchell as "more than adequately" dealing with Lesage's objections to *Screen*'s Freudianism, it's useful to take a look at Mitchell's book. In her new work, Mitchell expands on what was a brief chapter in her earlier *Woman's Estate* (1971). As the title indicates, it deals with Freudian theory as it relates to women: the first section explicating Freud, then going on to critique Wilhelm Reich and R.D. Laing from Mitchell's position of orthodox Freudianism (i.e., strict, traditional, sanctioned psychoanalytic thought), continuing with a critique of feminist criticisms of Freud, and ending with her own theory of patriarchy, an unsuccessful attempt at a fusion of Freud, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss.

A full discussion of Mitchell's work would have to be quite long. I'm not going to attempt that here. But I think sufficient questions can be raised to demolish the Brewster-Heath-MacCabe assumption that Mitchell's book in any sense adequately deals with Lesage's specific objections. At the beginning of her book, Mitchell executes a very clever maneuver by specifying psychoanalysis, following Jacques Lacan, as the "science of the unconscious." And if we ask what the "unconscious" is, we are told that it is what Freud found it to be. This is circular reasoning: using it one could construct any number of closed system "sciences." Tarot card reading, by this process, can be claimed as a "science": it is what its founding practitioners said it was.

Now Mitchell does this for a good reason. Essentially she wishes to distinguish psychoanalysis from psychiatric therapy and the general field of psychology. It is, according to her, not part of, not allied with, these fields, but it is a completely separate and self-contained “science.” Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe accept this intellectual sleight of hand without blinking, blithely ignoring along with Mitchell, the underlying methodological problems. (What, for example, are the standards of evidence for a science? What would be the evidence for psychology as a science? What would be the evidence for a “science of the unconscious”?) But Mitchell’s definition is totally inadequate to describe Freud’s project. For example, Mitchell uses the “science of the unconscious” argument to separate Freudian theory from clinical practice (although this itself is a heresy within mainstream Freudianism).

Much more seriously, it presents an unusual, nay unrecognizable, version of Freud. Freud is here the theorist of the unconscious, the founder of the science of the unconscious, and nothing more. (Inconsistently, Freud the man is later reintroduced from time to time when it is useful for attacking other positions.) Gone is Freud the founder of modern psychology; gone is Freud the social theorist of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. But Freud is really too large to fit in Mitchell’s closet. He was a clinician, and his life’s work was clearly directed at therapeutic ends. He was a social theorist with a particular version of history, and his work was also aimed at constructing a general explanation of human psychology and civilization.

Mitchell narrows, by taking out of history, Freud’s role in the foundations of psychology. Freud’s own definition of psychoanalysis as “the science of the mental unconscious,” which Mitchell quotes on p. xii to establish her narrow definition of psychoanalysis, was very clearly stated by Freud at a time when he wished to differentiate psychoanalysis from medicine and from the prevailing psychiatry which found only physical causes for mental disturbance. Indeed, Freud complains, in the very passage Mitchell quotes, that medicine does not study “the higher intellectual functions” (a phrasing which certainly covers more than the narrowly defined unconscious). In this period, Freud was interested in developing a general psychology, gathering into one field what formerly was split between medicine and philosophy. As he remarked in 1927,

“[Psychoanalysis] is certainly not the whole of psychology, but its substructure and perhaps even its entire foundation.”

Although the topic of her book—psychoanalysis and feminism—to some extent excuses her, as a defense of Freud to an U.S. reader, Mitchell fails by carefully not engaging the heaviest critiques and revisions of Freud. Such critiques have come both from within a therapeutic and/ or theoretical perspective (Adler, Sullivan, Homey, Jung, Gestalt, From, etc.) on the one hand, and empirical research on the other (biological research on mental activity, genetics, psychopharmacology, etc.). There has also been critical work on areas of crucial importance to the

Freudian system such as sexual response (Masters and Johnson) and early child development (Piaget and many others). All of this is dismissed by Mitchell for not accepting the unconscious, that is, the strict Freud-as-interpreted-by-Lacan definition of the unconscious. (Of course it has to be dismissed, for such work questions basic postulates of Freudian thought.) Any argument of any kind is basically dismissed for not matching the definitions of the faithful: there is only one True and Revealed Unconscious, and The Holy Sigmund brought it to us mortals.

Mitchell's book is not a dispassionate investigation into the subject of psychoanalysis and feminism. Rather it is a highly partisan defense of Freud in the face of feminist and other critiques of Freud. (It was received in *The Psychoanalytic Review* as a rousing putdown of feminism.) While Mitchell is incisive in pointing out the inadequacies of Wilhelm Reich's and R.D. Laing's alternate psychologies, her critique comes entirely from within the Freudian fortress. Thus she never acknowledges that the motivation of Reich and Laing began with their recognition of fundamental lapses in the Freudian system. For example, she *mentions* one of Laing's principal criticisms—that Freud's psychology takes the single, isolated, reified personality as its object of study and has little interest in social interaction beyond infant personality formation—but she never *deals with or answers* this point. Rather, Laing's overall project is found unsatisfactory, and dismissed totally. This is simply begging the question.

In replying to Lesage, Brewster-Heath-MacCabe do the same thing. Lesage mentioned Laing's crucial objection to Freudian thought. In response, the *Screen* trio takes Mitchell's purism a step further:

“Various kinds of Freudian revisionism (with the exception of Lacan, apparently], the ‘existentialist psychoanalysis’ of Laing, already much more remote from the psychoanalytic tradition, and the ‘sexology’ of Masters and Johnson cannot be synthesized into any coherent position...”

Of course not. This is to set up a straw position and then to knock it down. And while a clever polemical device, it is also a classic avoidance technique, and intellectually a bit shoddy. Mitchell and the *Screen* Freudians continually fall into this “either-or” pattern. Either Freud is 100% right or he is 100% wrong; same with Laing, who opposes Freud. Laing is found to be less than 100% right; therefore, Freud is 100% right and we need not examine Laing's critique of Freud. Clearly, it is unsound thinking. It is also, in Freudian terms. oral absolutism and anal compulsive reaction formation. Against such argument one can only direct the unconvinced to the many volumes commenting on Freudian position, beginning with the basic histories of psychology and the standard textbooks. And I can note in passing that in the process of her special pleading, two severe internal problems appear in Mitchell's revision of Freud. First, she claims that Freud was not prescriptive, but she must claim so in the face of his constantly implied and invoked norms. Second, she concentrates on the Freud of 1890-1920 and never

adequately comes to grips. with the later elaboration of the concepts of ego, id, and superego, and libido, and Freud's view of history.

## NOT RECONCILED

"Phallus? Penis? I always called it a wee-wee." —200  
MOTELS

The excursion into Mitchell's version of Freud has not been for nothing, for Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe also accept psychoanalysis as a system that cannot be refuted, only adjusted from within. But, standing outside the theoretical edifice, one can point out that it is built on shifting sands. So, here is a running commentary on their "Comment" in reply to Lesage.

To begin, the three Freudians seem not to know how to deal with being attacked—and by a woman. This may be a difference in intellectual traditions (British repressed manners vs. U.S. rough house), but it seems as well to reflect their distance from militant feminism. (A distance which in turn brings into question the closeness of their "theoretical practice" to the real world.)

Be that as it may, the writers pretend not to understand what orthodox Freudianism is, or might be (orthodox: sound or correct in doctrine). This is for good reason, for as they admit there is considerable variation internationally among the various sanctioning bodies: most particularly, the French organization expelled Jacques Lacan for revisionism in the 1950s, a purge upheld by the international body. Since our British Freudians favor Lacan, sidestepping the issue here saves them the expenditure of energy required to deal with the question of creeping revisionism. After all, once admitted, revisionism tends to get out of hand. But the fact remains that in following Lacan they are in a Freudian revisionist camp (though doubtless Lacan and his followers see themselves as the true adherents of the doctrine-part of the pathology of revisionism).

The *Screen* troika goes on to identify a serious problem: if there is a Freudian orthodoxy, one might see the Freudian system as "totally ideological, as furnishing no hold of knowledge." This needs a little explanation for the uninitiated. (*Screen* writers in general have a magnificent ability to cover their intellectual tracks and assume everyone has read the books they have, and that there is common knowledge of and agreement on terms. This may stem from the elite tradition of British intellectual life: a coterie speaking to itself. In contrast, Americans toss out footnotes with democratic abandon.) Anyway, "ideological" here means "false" and "knowledge" means "truth." The terms are taken over from Althusser.

The Freudian trio can't quite bring itself to admitting the validity of the feminist critiques Lesage mentions ("may be legitimate ... certain currents of Freudian thought"), but it is "beside the point," because the only valid critique they will allow is an internal one. The charge of

sexism is thus meaningless, for the “science of the unconscious” does not allow for it. Then comes the defense based on Freud’s *intention*. However, Lesage’s argument was clearly made on the basis of Freud’s *result*—that is, what psychoanalysis actually says and does. (And since intent is at least fairly private, and certainly heavily influenced by unconscious factors, how do Brewster, Heath, and MacCabe *know* Freud’s intent? Even within the realm of psychoanalytic postulates this is a pretty weak plea.)

Next, the three commentators throw out a red herring: Lesage’s authorities are found to be “incompatible.” (Somehow this suffices for them not to deal with the knowledge—to use their term—that might be gained from considering anyone but Freud and Lacan.) Therefore, being incompatible, they can’t be “synthesized into any coherent position,” though Lesage never said that they could. (The three never do get around to indicating how Freud and Marx can be “synthesized into any coherent position.”) So, we need a

“coherent position from which it would be possible to move from a protest against oppression to the knowledge of that oppression which is also a precondition (but not the only or the first one) of its removal.”

This is curious. It certainly seems on this side of the Atlantic that women know their oppression, and that increasingly they are acting to remove it, for example in struggles against wage discrimination and for child care. Apparently our Freudians haven’t considered Mao’s classic statement,

“Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone.”

But perhaps I just don’t understand what they do mean by “knowledge.” I do understand their ability to set up a straw woman rather than deal with Lesage’s points. They begin by completely altering Lesage’s rejection of “an oppressive orthodox Freudianism that takes the male as the basis for defining the female,” by changing it into “the desire for a social practice that will give as much sanction to the ‘feminine’ as it does to the ‘masculine.’” They claim that this incorrect formulation of Lesage’s position “presupposes the natural pre-existence of masculine and feminine subjects.” But Lesage’s article neither explicitly nor implicitly argues a “natural pre-existence” but rather biological and social difference. Lesage states,

“we have to recognize entirely different social experiences based on the fact of sex, the fact of the oppression of one sex.” (emphasis added).

Is it perhaps a classic male defense mechanism—not listening to a woman—operating here: attempting to deny biological and social differences, and sexual oppression?

They go on to claim that what Lesage “really rejects” is Freud’s bisexuality theory. (What they mean is Lacan’s bisexuality theory.) There is, in their universe of discourse, no way of questioning Freud’s or Lacan’s postulates. The “science of the unconscious” ploy resolves all lingering problems, cuts off all questions, liquidates the opposition. If the work of others suggests major flaws in orthodox Freudian views, this is not the occasion for a re-examination, but rather for a polemical defense. Thus we find Mitchell and the *Screen* Freudians either redefining the Freudian project in an attempt to make irrelevant any objections from others, or holding the fort against all intruders. It smacks of a conversion experience, for none of them apparently can believe that anyone was ever able to offer any criticism of Freud with any measure of validity, or that Freud’s insights might be developed and made more sophisticated. In fact, they are perfectly happy redefining objections; it’s a marvelous theory that can put words in the mouths of its opponents.

And of course, putting words in one’s opponents’ mouths means you don’t have to listen to what they are saying. Thus, Brewster-Heath-MacCabe essentially deny women’s oppression. It’s the oppression of “femininity,” according to them. “The mechanisms of socialization, which are inherently oppressive to women,” (Lesage) becomes according to the Freudian trio: “only secondary conditioning.” If it’s any consolation, they add they are not “reconciled to an ineradicable inferiority of women.” But they seem pretty content with finding females inferior in the present. “Not reconciled” is not the same thing as “opposed.” And of course, their very wording illustrates their sexism: the “inferiority” not the “oppression” of women. (Is the working class also “inferior”?) And eradicating the problem? Apparently all women need is a good psychoanalyst.

Well, we’ve heard it all before. The commentary does go on to something new: their Lacanian exposition of concepts and terms. In the hands of our three commentators, Lacan’s sybilline pose and prose becomes tortured phrasing (take any line at random). All of this monkey business is important, they finally get around to saying, because it will explain the “construction of the subject” (the film observer). But how do they *know* it will do this? Again, were supposed to take it on faith, and Lacan’s authority.

#### UNASKED QUESTIONS, UNQUESTIONED ANSWERS

“In a way, this diversity is very exciting, but one has at some point to ask: are these real beginnings, or so many false starts?” —Juliet Mitchell

At the moment *Screen* appears to be in transition from one distinct view to another of what film is (in the sense of what we should be most concerned with in thinking about it). The established and more predominant view regards film and films as relatively autonomous objects of study. The minority view considers film in history, in society,



and in terms of the audience. Most frequently both views are found. For example, Stephen Heath's analysis of *TOUCH OF EVIL* (Spring and Summer 15) is both a detailed internal analysis and at two significant points goes "outside" the film to discuss the Mexico-Latin American theme, and the character of Susan as an object of exchange within the male world of the film—both important aspects ignored by other commentators. In addition, Heath's goal, as he states it, is not to arrive at a comprehensive "meaning" for the film, but to use it as a text in which to examine how elements of the film work on the subject, that is, the audience.

There is an uneasiness in *Screen*'s work here. Brewster recognizes that viewers may impose their own readings on a film, and that class is a factor in this. But he also argues that readers "are not free" to invent [their] own reading of the film."

"A reading which may not be that of the makers imposes itself on the reader, it has a force which cannot simply be denied." (Spring 75).

This must be questioned. Certainly there are boundaries beyond which a reading of a film cannot go. But is there really "a reading which ... imposes itself on the reader?" There is considerable basis to doubt this assertion. (See, for example, Evan Pattak's article on responses to *THE PEDESTRIAN* in *JUMP CUT* 7.) *Screen*'s writers are anti-sociological (unable to recognize a Marxist sociology, apparently) and anti-empirical (unable, apparently, to recognize the Marxist imperative to use and go beyond, not to discard *a priori*, what can be gained from empirical study). The *Screen* group seems determined to find a single reading at the expense of considering ambivalence, ambiguity, irony, and polysemy within the film on the one hand, and neglecting variety within the mass audience and contradictions within the individuals in the audience on the other.

Thus their concentration on the "construction of the subject" takes this "subject" as isolated, individual, having a private experience of the film, and predetermined by the (Freudian) unconscious which in turn is determined by early childhood experience. The subject is essentially out of society and out of history (except the society of the nuclear family and the history of childhood personality development). Using this essentialist subject, in turn universalized, *Screen* falls into the very idealism it decries.

Between the *Screen* concept and Julia Lesage's argument that *Screen* constructs a subject which defines the female in terms of the male, which defines the female as "a lack," which ignores biological and social and political difference, which transforms oppression into "inferiority," there can be no synthesis. *Screen* has constructed a subject defined only by the male, free of class differences and class antagonisms and which has not been and is not affected by the subject's social history and social reality. Ideology then, when it isn't in the singular "reading" of the film, is shoved into a place (the unconscious) and a time (infant personality

formation) where only psychoanalysis can find it and bring it to our attention. Politically, this is a formula for quietism.

## A POLITICAL BASIS FOR FILM THEORY

“There’s a pain deep down inside  
It cannot be denied  
It can't be satisfied  
Let it go, let it go, let it go, let it go.”  
—“Constipation Blues,” Screaming Jay Hawkins

There is a question I have hesitated to ask until this point: are they Marxists? *Screen* and its writers have been remarkably coy about the matter, perhaps for tactical reasons of working within an establishment institution. At best they have used Marxist phrasings, invoking historical materialism, one of the three components of Marxism (Lenin), but not the other two—Marxist economic theory and the doctrine of class struggle. However, they are now being openly attacked as Marxists by Robin Wood, which may force them to take a stand.

In the meantime, *Screen*’s work seems most heavily colored by its reactive nature: anti-sociology, anti-utilitarian, anti-empiricism, anti-etc., rather than having its own logic of development. *Screen* the publication and *Screen* the loosely affiliated group of critics remain open to a number of serious political criticisms.

ONE. Although their version of psychoanalysis is dressed up in new words, it turns out to be about as simplistic as Hitchcock’s version of Freudian ideas in *PSYCHO* and *MARNIE*. One reason for this is that they have essentially leapfrogged their way to Lacan without doing their basic background reading. Most flagrantly, none of them mention Freud’s book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which is Freud’s clearest and most essential exposition of his ideas applied to verbal and narrative art. Also the *Screen* critics are apparently totally unfamiliar with major theorists on the use of psychoanalysis in art criticism, such as Rudolf Arnheim, Ernst Kris, Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, Simon Lesser, Charles Mauron, and Norman Holland, to name a few, since they don’t even mention them to dismiss them. Of course the purism and either-or way of thinking so characteristic of *Screen* articles is much easier to maintain if one claims one little patch of Freudian thought, the Lacanian garden, is Eden before the fall. But for all the fancy terms and redefinitions of older terms, it doesn’t take much to see what’s under this emperor’s new clothes.

TWO. There is a point when tolerance for the necessary complexity, high level of discourse, and apparent separation of theory from mundane concerns which is essential to theoretical development, has to wear out. To be blunt: how much longer do we have to wait until *Screen*’s writing is clear? Beyond its own circle, *Screen*’s unintelligibility is notorious. One example of many: Heath defines a key term in the third paragraph of his *TOUCH OF EVIL* essay:

“Reconstitution is the relation across the instance of the subject between the primary regulation (the construction of the individual subject) and the definition of this construction in specific signifying practices, its reconstruction or replacement, where ‘replacement’ means not merely the repetition of the place of that construction but also, more difficultly, the supplacement—the overplacement: supplementation or, in certain circumstances, supplantation (critical interruption)—of that construction in the place of its repetition, a refiguration of the subject.”

You don't have to be very familiar with psychoanalysis to see that this writing is extremely defensive, constantly setting up barriers between author and reader.

Intelligibility is a difficult editorial problem, one that JUMP CUT faces as well. John Hess and I constantly face the dilemma of receiving articles which may be of great importance to a small number of our readers, but which will be beyond the experience of most of our readers. How does one—editor, writer, filmmaker—decide what audience she or he is addressing and what effect an article or film will have? *Screen* is not oblivious to this problem. MacCabe's exposition of Lacan in the Summer 75 issue followed their introduction of unexplained Lacanian concepts by a full year, but it was a healthy and lucid explanation of Lacan—doubtless the best short introduction in English. Also MacCabe recognizes the unnecessary difficulty of, and inherent elitism of, the *Screen* trend of film writing in his Spring 75 review of a book of essays on Raoul Walsh. But the overall trend in *Screen* remains crabbed writing with crucial concepts used without introductory definition (e.g., Jacques Derrida's concept of 'difference,' the Freudian distinction between unconscious and preconscious). We have to ask, to whom are they speaking? And answer, all too often, only to themselves.

THREE. *Screen* has moved through a series of interests in the 1970s: structuralism, semiology, French concepts of ideology in film, Russian Formalism, Brecht, and now psychoanalysis. I certainly don't think that this is an intended weakness for fads, as is frequently charged. However, in effect because each has been presented with some fanfare as the new key to open all locked doors in film criticism, and each has been presented in a basically ex cathedra way, something is awry. As *Screen* moves along we find the methodology changes, but two things remain disturbingly the same. First, the body of key films remains basically the same old auteurist favorites. Second, *Screen* continually opts for formalism, as seen most clearly in their ability to elevate Brecht's anti-illusionist techniques above his political content, effecting the same separation as bourgeois Brecht critics.

FOUR. In their argument for a Lacanian-Freudian explanation of the person, the *Screen* critics attempt a new kind of biological determinism by claiming personality is decisively established prior to the influence of class and other social factors. Personality is a virtual universal,

determined in early childhood. However this theory is in flagrant contradiction with their proclaimed materialism, for, in the case of their postulates about females, they can offer no explanation of how—given their description of women—feminism has developed in individuals, and in a massive movement. Essentially the Lacanian-Freudian model recognizes the realm of current ideology without being able to offer any material basis on which that ideology can be changed. According to this theory, the limited but significant struggle against patriarchal institutions and ideology in Cuba, say, does not and cannot exist. This is anti-empiricism *ad absurdum*.

FIVE. In their enthusiasm for Althusser as a corrective to the obvious mechanistic problems of Vulgar Marxism, the *Screen* group has fallen into a considerable confusion and distortion of Marxism. Althusser, reiterating a Marxist commonplace, speaks of ideology as presenting imaginary or false relationships as if they were real or true relations. Claire Johnston, in the Summer 75 *Screen*, transforms this into “Althusser’s thesis as to the essentially imaginary nature of ideology,” which is a distortion of Althusser and Marxism. Ideology is not imaginary; it can have the effect of a material force in history. From this kind of misunderstanding (one so flagrant one can only wonder if they have read any Marx or any Marxism besides Althusser), there follows a chain of thought: false = imaginary = imagination (in the Romantic sense) = unconscious (in the Freudian sense). Thereby ideology is deposited in the unconscious ... very strange, and also very non-Marxist. (Althusser, who has written favorably of Lacan, is not an innocent party to this confusion; the uninformed should be aware that Althusser’s version of Marxism is problematic and has come under considerable attack by other Marxists.)

In a similar vein, the *Screen* group seems to accept Althusser’s separation, in a series of his essays, of superstructure from base, of ideology from superstructure, and finally of art from ideology, without a second thought, although it results in a separation of art from base which makes any connection impossible, and which thereby goes far away from orthodox Marxism.

SIX. Essentially *Screen* separates politics from everyday life and in doing so liquidates political struggle. Following the political implications of *Screen*’s line of thought, we find that the task of the revolution and of revolutionaries is not to seize state power and the means of production, but to analyze ideology so we can liberate ourselves from it. The struggle against ideology takes the place of the class struggle, and the vanguard of the struggle: why, intellectuals trained in psychoanalysis! The result is a “theoretical practice” without political practice that results in no practical theory.

SEVEN. I think we have to ask seriously if we have time for much more of this. Let’s face it, it takes several years of an intellectual’s working life to master psychoanalysis, or semiology, or Marxism. Given *Screen*’s unabashed non-humility in proclaiming Lacanian psychoanalysis as the

revolutionary all-new-completely-reformulated-for-today's-toughest-intellectual-problems ANSWER, should we drop whatever else we're doing and get on this new bandwagon?

Hopefully *Screen* will change and develop. If it doesn't, it will remain important, but only to a miniscule elite. Patience is running out; skepticism is growing stronger. Unless *Screen* can show some substantial results with this new Lacanian excursion, one can only conclude that we're better off pursuing the answer to the question of ideology directly by spending our time on Marxism rather than using the indirect route of psychoanalysis.

#### POSTSCRIPT, POST-MILWAUKEE

I wrote the above before going to a symposium on film theory at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Nov. 18-22, which I'll report on in the next issue.

After talking with Stephen Heath and several other British film people at the conference, I want to qualify some of the above. While I still think the U.S. vs. British generalizations above have merit in indicating the sources and conditions of important differences, the situation is much more complex, of course. *Screen* sees itself and is seen as standing distinctly outside of the university establishment in England. Additionally, there are many more differences and shadings of opinions among the people associated with *Screen* than I have indicated. These differences have recently emerged in on intense internal debate over the magazine's future editorial direction. Finally, I should add that the real division has emerged in the guise of a national one (which this reply accentuates), but it crosses national lines in reality.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

### The old and the new: Latin American cinema at the (last?) Pesaro Festival

by Julianne Burton

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, pp. 33-35

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

When Lino Micciché, in his low-keyed opening remarks at the first evening film session, announced that this the 11th Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema might well be the last, there was hardly a stir from the auditorium filled to capacity with visiting journalists and local public. As the major forum for both feature and documentary films of an experimental and invariably political nature, and as an alternative to the “First-world,” established cinema of Hollywood and Western Europe, the Pesaro festival has played a major role since its inception in 1964. Its support for alternative film movements—bringing films and filmmakers together in a format which substitutes roundtable discussion for juries and competition, while still providing broad international exposure—has made a significant contribution to the survival of those movements. Films from Eastern Europe, Japan, Africa and the Arab countries have been consistently featured, but perhaps it is the Latin American filmmakers and their movements followers who have been the greatest beneficiaries of the Mostra.

Though early independent activities in Brazil and Argentina pre-date the festival’s founding, for the most part the lifespan of the militant New Latin American Cinema movement coincides with that of the Mostra. Virtually all the key films—several of which are still not available in the United States ([1](#))—had their first screening in that Italian seacoast town: Argentina’s *HOUR OF THE FURNACES\**, Bolivia’s *BLOOD OF THE CONDOR\** and *THE COURAGE OF THE PEOPLE\**, the films produced in socialist Chile and in the heyday of Brazil’s Cinema Novo movement, and Cuban masterpieces such as *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT\**, *LUCIA\**, and *DAYS OF WATER*. Who can predict the impact that the possible closing of the Mostra—coming as it does at a time of reactionary ascendancy in so many Latin American countries—may have on the survival of the New Latin American

## Cinema?

From the festival director's opening address, a subdued air, a sense of decline, characterized this traditionally controversial and often explosive festival. The audience remained an amorphous passive receptor throughout, failing to generate any real political exchange—either between the members of the audience themselves or, in those rare opportunities where the directors were present, between the audience and the filmmakers.

The Mostra was declared to be in a state of financial crisis of such dimensions as to jeopardize its survival. What was not stressed (because it was obvious?) was the political dimension of this economic bind. Pesaro is a communist-controlled Italian town in a Christian Democratic region, and the latter party is increasingly reluctant to legislate the funds formerly channeled into the festival. The most optimistic alternative, never fully elaborated, seems to be to relocate the festival on the opposite coast, at Livorno.

The new austerity had a direct impact on the social and consequently the political relations during the eight-day festival. In previous years, all invited guests—both filmmakers and journalists—were given free room and board at a central hotel. Casual encounters abounded in lobbies and elevators, and the dining room became the set for social interaction and lengthy political debate. Participants apparently had a sense of each other and—however temporary—a sense of themselves as a group, which was never generated this year. A second product of the new economic constraints was the absence of simultaneous translation into anything but Italian, and occasionally French. In the past, Spanish and English were available as well. Since this year's films, with very few exceptions, were in Portuguese and Spanish, aural comprehension was difficult for many viewers. Lack of simultaneous translation also seemed to restrain discussion after specific presentations.

The political content of the festival itself, apart from what was manifest or to be construed on an individual basis from the specific films, was generally reduced to the formal reading of declarations—against the fascist policies of the Chilean junta and specifically the incarceration of several film people, for example, or against the current state of siege in Argentina and the government's mounting repression against all cultural workers on the left, especially those involved in filmmaking. Outside the theater, the political presence was considerably greater, as more and more Italian left groups set up displays of newspapers, literature, posters and records. One group appropriated the central arcade for a series of bulletin boards which graphically detailed the plight of Latin American workers and peasants under the current repressive regimes.

Some of the more seasoned and cynical journalists at the festival speculated that even the film selection was dictated by economic necessity. Specifically, they indicated that the two simultaneous program cycles offered—a retrospective of Brazilian Cinema Novo and of

Italian filmmaking under fascism—were determined in large part on the basis of the modest financial outlay they required. The Chilean exile production of the past year, the new Cuban and Argentine output, and the less numerous films from other Latin American countries were interspersed among thirty-five from a movement which—as the films themselves demonstrated—has now come full circle. It has moved from banality through genius to the current powerlessness in the face of governmental suppression.

But the programming ran the risk of mistakenly attributing the past-glories-reduced-to-naught syndrome to all of Latin American cinema. First world critics have a fascination with the Brazilian Cinema Novo. In both Europe and the U.S., the amount of critical material available on the Brazilian film cycle rivals that can be found on all other Latin American national film movements combined). But now it must be recognized that one approaches Cinema Novo today as an essentially historical phenomenon. Despite counterrevolutionary coups, political repression, exile, and increased difficulties in both production and distribution, the same cannot and should not be said (yet) for filmmaking in Argentina, Bolivia, or even Chile, and certainly not for Cuba nor, for that matter, Colombia, Panama and Venezuela, where film production is on the rise.

#### CINEMA NOVO REVISITED

While underlining the historical nature of current interest in the Cinema Novo, I don't mean to undercut the importance of that interest. The Pesaro retrospective offered a unique opportunity to see the entire spectrum of Cinema Novo production, ranging from the late fifties to recent efforts to resuscitate a defunct movement. The work of Cinema Novo's major directors—Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Ruy Guerra, Leon Hirszman, Carlos Diegues, Glauber Rocha—was shown in its virtual entirety. Unfortunately, random ordering of films and the absence of an introduction or discussion which would set the idiosyncratic Brazilian film product in a context intelligible to non-specialists somewhat reduced the possibility of appreciating the movement in its full significance.

Because Pereira dos Santos' first feature, *RIO, QUARENTA GRAUS* (*RIO, FORTY DEGREES*, 1955), was inexplicably absent, the survey of his work began with the second and last of his unfinished trilogy in Rio de Janeiro, *RIO, ZONA NORTE* (*RIO, NORTH ZONE*, 1957). Despite expectations generated by his masterpiece *VIDAS SECAS\** (*BARREN LIVES*, 1963, McGraw-Hill Contemporary Films), nothing in his subsequent and (for a third world filmmaker) prolific output measured up to that unrelenting portrayal of the vicious circle of survival for a migrant family in Brazil's barren northeast. Among his recent films characterized by obscure politics and indiscriminate violence and populated by mod and post-adolescents with mystical trappings (*FOME DE AMOR—HUNGER FOR LOVE*, 1968; *QUEM E BETA?—WHO IS BETA?*, 1973), only *COME ERA GOSTOSO O MEU FRANCES\** (*HOW*



TASTY WAS MY LITTLE FRENCHMAN, 1970, New Yorker) stands out as non-derivative. The film is a serious reconstruction of Brazil's Tupinamba Indians in the 16th century and succeeds remarkably well in shedding the European heritage of cultural ethnocentricity as it portrays, in measured style and dazzling setting, one Frenchman's assimilation to "paradise" and his eventual sacrifice according to plan (no hard feelings, *n'est-ce pas?*).

Ruy Guerra has the flashiest of the generally flamboyant Brazilian cinematography. His early OS CAFAJESTES (THE DELINQUENTS, 1962), an Antonioniesque study of alienation, debasement and petty anti-social rebellion on Zabriskie-like beaches, boasts a magnificent ten-minute circular pan which, ranging from long shot to close up, gradually closes in on its naked target. The alienation of OS DEUSES E OS MORTOS\* (THE GODS AND THE DEAD, 1970) is of a different sort, deserting Antonioni for Godard. This is quintessential Cinema Novo (decadent period) in its allegorical bent, its hyperbolic and interminable bloodshed, and its political obscurantism where symbol masquerades as analysis. Mysteriously, OS FUZIS\* (THE GUNS, 1963), reputed to be Guerra's best, was not screened at the Mostra.

Leon Hirszman's films pursue the subtle and the psychological searching for the contradictions of character. A FALECIDA (THE DECEASED WOMAN, 1965) wills her own death in anticipation of her opulent funeral. Her husband, following her instructions, discovers her rich and corrupt former lover and uncovers a passionate and abandoned side of the woman who, with him, had always been neurotic, repressed and obsessive. SAO BERNARDO (1971) traces the rise of a self-made *fazendeiro* as he conquers Sao Bernardo, the ranch (*fazenda*) of his dreams, and a refined wife to go with it. This is a tale of self realization in a double sense. In the process of achieving his material goals, the protagonist is confronted with his own egotism, suspicion and exploitiveness —the same traits which drive his wife to suicide.

The films of Carlos Diegues constitute a kind of capsule thematic recapitulation of Cinema Novo. GANGA ZUMBA\* (1964), like many early Cinema Novo works, finds its inspiration in a regionalist novel of the sugar-bearing northeastern coast. With its predominantly black cast, the film attempts to present the slaves' view of life on the plantation and the liberating alternative of Palmares, the most famous and enduring of the runaway slave communities. Diegues' rendering remains an essentially liberal, idealized one. The film prefers to focus on oppression and the process of escape rather than on the complexities of autonomous social organization and constant guerrilla warfare implicit in any first-hand view of the rebel society. In the film's context, rather than the historical actuality it was, Palmares becomes a folk myth. A GRANDE CIUDADS\* (THE BIG CITY, 1966) represents the next step of the Cinema Novo's geographic-thematic progression. It is the over-sentimentalized story of a young woman who migrates from the Northeast to Rio in search of her boyfriend. He, of course, has turned into a criminal who wants to reform. It's clearly too late and their love

for one another can only lead to a tragic end, etc., etc..

With OS HEREDEIROS\* (THE INHERITORS, 1969), Diegues, like his fellow directors of the same period, moves from the sentimentalized depiction of class-linked oppression to an attempted analysis of the class responsible for it, their own. They depicted the Brazilian haute-bourgeoisie whom the 1964 coup and subsequent decades of miraculous economic growth under the wing of the U.S. imperial eagle have so directly benefited. Rocha in TERRA EM TRANSE\* (LAND IN ANGUISH, 1967) and Gustavo Dahl in O BRAVO GUERREIRO\* (THE BRAVE WARRIOR, 1968) undertake a similar analysis. Diegues' film is the broadest in scope, encompassing the realms of the young urban liberal, the traditional landed gentry, and the major national power-brokers who control government and the media, and ranging in time from the 1930s to the mid-sixties.

Diegues' most recent film, QUANDO O CARNAVAL CHEGAR (WHEN CARNIVAL COMES, 1974), is a self-conscious throwback to pre-Cinema Novo banality. Ostensibly a spoof on the *chanchada* (a kind of superficial musical comedy), this film is more *chanchada* than spoof. Despite the unceasing schemes of their zany agent, this band of itinerant musicians—which includes Chico Buarque de Holanda, the most famous of the young Brazilian singers—never consents to perform for “the king.” Cinema Novo is here reduced to an entertainment film, free of a subversive self-critical dimension on either the verbal or the visual level. Social protest is reduced to passive resistance.

Glauber Rocha, most internationally renowned of the Cinema Novo filmmakers, and the only one to go into permanent political exile, put in a brief appearance at the festival but disappeared before his rumored press conference. The practice of excluding films made outside Brazil or not completely Brazilian in theme prevented the showing of his more recent works (DER LEONE HAPT SEPT CABEZAS\*—THE LION HAS SEVEN HEADS, 1970; CABEZAS CORTADAS—SEVERED HEADS, 1971; and TATU BOLA, 1972). The major films of the pre-exile period were all shown at the festival, though many were relegated to the second program cycle, presumably because of the generous exposure they have received in the past. These include the early collaboration on BARRAVENTO\* (1962), saga of love, superstition and political awakening in a black fishing village; TERRA EM TRANSE\* (LAND IN ANGUISH, 1967); and the famous DEUS E O DIABLO NA TERRA DO SOL\* (BLACK GOD, WHITE DEVIL, 1963, Hurlock Cine World) and O DRAGAO DA MALADE CONTRA O SANTO GUERREIRO\* (ANTONIO DAS MORTES, 1968, Hurlock Cine World).

HISTORIA DO BRASIL, Rocha's most recent film, which has been three years in the making, received a mixed response. Faced with the same problem as the exiled Chileans, the inaccessibility of original footage, Rocha and his collaborator Marcos Medeiros raid the film archives and produce a pastiche of “highlights” from the Cinema Novo, sprinkled with Cuban newsreel footage, excerpts from Hollywood heart-warmers, and

other assorted borrowings. Five centuries of Brazilian history are 'covered' in some two hours—the last century virtually on a year-by-year basis.

Such breadth of scope precludes any depth of analysis. A traditional and elitist historical concept predominates which defines history as the enumeration of events in the lives of rich and powerful men. Two women are cited in the course of the film, though their particular significance is never made clear. There is no attempt to provide an in-depth analysis, to ferret out the larger historical currents, to give a sense of dialectical process. The more generous-minded viewers perceived a potential dialectic—or at least a self-conscious artistic intention—in the persistent disjunction between visual image and narration. But pointing to an absence of artistic and intellectual control are the indiscriminate randomness of much of the material, sloppiness of assembly (split still photographs improperly lined up, at least one image photographed backwards), and total lack of restraint. (Why include the entire credits of SAO PAULO SOCIEDADE ANONIMA—SAO PAULO, INC.—without tying it in any way to the rest of the film?) Cinematically pedestrian, the film failed to make creative use of image or sound (music was kept to a minimum) and failed to mold diverse and autonomous elements into a unified whole.

The film was not lacking in unconscious irony, however. The following headline was shown, accompanied a still of a well-known Brazilian novelist: "During his entire life, Jose Lins do Rego fought against the assertion that his work lacked inventiveness and was only a collection of photographs." If the names were changed, this might stand as an epigram for Medeiros' and Rocha's film. In the context of a festival dedicated to a retrospective of Cinema Novo, in this poorly assembled filmic scrapbook, the movement becomes at best a sort of guessing game for initiates. (Who can identify the source of the footage first?) For those not in a playful mood, it is a tedious experience, more mystifying than demystifying, and saddening above all.

One of the most original and memorable new films screened at the festival was also Brazilian. However—perhaps in large part due to the collaboration of Wolf Gauer and Stopfilm—it revealed no debts to Cinema Novo. Jorge Bodanzky's IRACEMA, described as an "interpretative" or "fictional" documentary. In it, a small cast of non-professional actors (with one exception) improvise the action against a background of real people in real situations, filmed in direct cinema style. Iracema, a 15-year-old Amazonian of pure Indian blood, deserts her family's boat and subsistence existence for the glittering baubles of Belem on festival day. She is picked up by Tiao Brasil Grande, who takes her with him on a run to haul virgin timber from the interior. He promises her broad horizons—Rio, Sao Paulo—but on the return trip he dumps her at a raunchy all-night bar. Faced with the chance to make an "honest living," Iracema prefers "wandering around" to the backbreaking and blinding option of embroidering twelve hours a day. She is taken advantage of, deceived, abused. Her most violent

abduction, significantly, is at the hands of a group of soldiers. The film refrains from voyeurism and titillation by focusing on the prelude and the results rather than on the actual experience of her degradation. Interconnected sequences of stripping and burning entire forests, of highway construction, of selling indentured workers wholesale, put Iracema's (an anagram of "America") experience in a larger perspective without belaboring the point.

As the film ends, Tiao Brasil Grande runs into Iracema once again. He fails to recognize her, poorly dressed now, missing a tooth, and in the company of derelict and drunken prostitutes. He rejects her approach and then refuses her request for five *cruzeiros*. In the last shot his new red truck vanishes down the dirt road, leaving Iracema behind, broke and stranded, "Filho de puta" (son of a whore) she yells after him, her only revenge a self-deprecating insult.

The parallels between the colony-metropolis relationship and that of the dominant male-dependent female are well taken. Tiao moves on once Iracema has been "exhausted," just as the neo-colonialists freely abandon exploited territory for the virgin region further on Tiao is always in the driver's seat. He calls the shots and Iracema goes along for the ride, convinced that she is finally going somewhere when in fact she is only being "taken" to her own destruction.

## OTHER LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

### CHILE

Last year, on the first anniversary of the fascist coup d'etat, the Pesaro festival featured the films of the two major Chilean directors, Miguel Littin (THE JACKAL OF NAHUELTORO\*, COMPAÑERO PRESIDENTE\*, THE PROMISED LAND\*) and Raul Ruiz (THREE SAD TIGERS, QUE HACER?\*—with the U.S. director Saul Landau, NO ONE SAID A THING, etc.). This year there was a continuing emphasis on Chilean cinema and an opportunity to seriously consider the options and prospects of an exiled film movement.

The Chilean film movement, which developed under the Popular Unity government, lives on in Sweden, East and West Germany, France, Cuba. As Alvaro Ramirez, one of the Chilean filmmakers present at the festival, asserted, there is no filmmaking in Pinochet's Chile. The junta did commission one film, LOS MIL DIAS (THE THOUSAND DAYS), to give their revised version of Chile's three years under socialism. But they were forced to ban their own film because no amount of narrative obfuscation could obscure the truth of the documentary images.

Of the eight films by Chileans and/or on Chile, five used pre-coup footage or material shot at the time of the coup and subsequently smuggled out. Two (Sergio Castilla's QUISIERA TENER UN HIJO—I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A CHILD, and Beatriz Gonzalez' DULCE PATRIA—SWEET HOMELAND) used childrens' drawings as one imaginative solution to the lack of new material. Only one film, by the

intrepid East German film journalists Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, was shot in fascist Chile. The same abandoned northern mines whose militant labor history drew the filmmakers to them in the summer of 1973, before the coup of September 11th, were repopulated when they returned in 1974. No longer commercially viable, their desolate location and derelict buildings now provide the junta with made-to-order concentration camps. By a combination of ingenuity (the filmmakers') and incompetence (the military officials'), which the film explains in detail, Heynowski and Scheumann gained unrestricted access to two major concentration camps, Chacabuco and Pisagua, including the one privilege which Pinochet's attaché had expressly forbidden: the opportunity to photograph and interview detainees. According to the filmmakers' own account:

"The people being interviewed knew nothing of who it was asking them questions. All photography was under military escort. The voices and the facial expressions are eloquent enough testimony to the meaning of fascism at every instant, when arbitrariness, insecurity, terror, isolation and imprisonment reign. We constantly had the impression that we were witnesses to a tenacious solidarity whose mission is to survive and to cling to life for the sake of a future which will be."

The resulting film, ICH WAR, ICH BIN, ICH WERDE SEIN (I WAS, I AM, I WILL BE), juxtaposes this testimonial footage of silent struggle to reminiscences of the miners who slaved and fought a different but interconnected struggle on the same site. The filmmakers interview Pinochet and Gonzalez Videla (the anti-communist dictator of the forties who drove Neruda underground and into exile), the military officer in charge of Chacabuco and the one in charge of the temporary camp for detainees in the National Stadium. Though not yet available in the United States, the film has been shown in thirty-five countries to date. This past September, on the second anniversary of the coup, it was televised via Eurovision to millions of Europeans.

CON LOS PUÑOS FRENTE AL CAÑON (FISTS AGAINST THE CANONS), produced in West Berlin by the Grupo Lautauero, is a polished and brilliantly documented historical reconstruction of the rise of the Chilean workers' movement. Begun in the euphoria of the UP victory, the film originally intended to trace Chilean proletarian militancy from its origins through its peak and subsequent suppression by a bourgeois counterrevolution in the 30s and 40s to its final victory in the 1970s. Before the film could be completed, however, a second and much bloodier counterrevolution was unleashed. The film became instead a meditation on history's "nightmarish repetitions."

Alvaro Ramirez' LA HISTORIA ES NUESTRA Y LA HACEN LOS PUEBLOS (HISTORY IS OURS AND IT IS THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE IT), conceived as an exploration of the problem of food shortages and the black market, was in the final editing stages when the coup occurred.

The footage was smuggled out of Chile and reedited in East Berlin to include a broader thematic construct of the continuing clandestine struggle and the inevitable victory over the forces of repression, as the title—from a speech by Salvador Allende—suggests.

Continuing ties established during the Allende years, two Chilean films have recently been completed in Cuba. Patricia Castilla's film **NOMBRE DE GUERRA: MIGUEL ENRIQUEZ** (**NOM DE GUERRE: MIGUEL ENRIQUEZ**) is a short film-tribute, with a stylistic debt to the Cuban documentarist Santiago Alvarez, to the life and political career of a founder and leader of the MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left).

**LA BATALLA DE CHILE: LA LUCHA DE UN PUEBLO SIN ARMAS** (**THE BATTLE OF CHILE: THE STRUGGLE OF A PEOPLE WITHOUT ARMS**) is a projected four-and-a-half hour documentary in three parts: Part I, **LA INSURRECCION DE LA BURGUESIA** (**THE INSURRECTION OF THE BOURGEOISIE**) was shown at Pesaro and several other recent European festivals; Part II, **EL GOLPE DE ESTADO** (**THE COUP D'ETAT**) has just been completed but is not yet in distribution; and Part III, **LOS PODERES DEL PUEBLO** (**THE POWERS OF THE PEOPLE**), now in production, will deal with the popular resistance.

The list of those who collaborated on the film is impressive. The Equipo Tercer Año consists of six filmmakers who worked together throughout the UP period under the direction of Patricio Guzman. Pedro Chaskel, head of UCAL (Latin American Union of Film Societies), is credited with the editing, and Jorge Muller, abducted and held as an “unacknowledged prisoner” by the secret police since November 29, 1974,<sup>(2)</sup> was director of photography on this as well as many other award-winning Chilean films. Militant French filmmaker Chris Marker helped get the footage out of Chile and collaborated in its final shaping. Marta Harnecker, former editor of the magazine *Chile Hoy* and co-author of the famous *Cuadernos de Educacion Popular* (popular pamphlets offering a Marxist social analysis), and Cuban filmmaker and film theorist Julio Garcia Espinosa served as special advisors.

The most effectively analytical of all the Chilean documentaries at the Mostra, this film divides the “bourgeois insurrection” into five parts: commodity shortages, black markets and popular antidotes; Parliamentary maneuvers; student politics; strikes by managerial unions; and the strike of the El Teniente copper miners. As the film opens, a mosaic of brusque mini-interviews on the occasion of the interim national elections of March 1973 conveys the level of frenetic political passion on both left and right. The final footage, shot during the first (unsuccessful) coup attempt on the 29th of June, is overpowering in its abrupt finality. As history, as first-hand testimony, and above all as cogent analysis, this film is an impressive achievement which deserves the widest exposure.

ARGENTINA

Argentina was represented at the Mostra by five films: two black and white documentaries and three feature films, in color, which rival first world productions in visual style and level of technical competence. The most visually striking of the three was, in fact, a directorial debut. Bebe Kamin, a young engineer with a psychological bent, active in film societies and related activities for the past nine years, calls *EL BUHO* (THE OWL) an “apprentice film” because of the range of its techniques. A fiction film of often understated dramatic intensity, it also contains surrealistic fantasy sequences, documentary reconstructions, an animated section, and a comic spoof on the production of a telenovela (soap opera). It is the most sensitive portrayal I have seen of female experience by a male director—of the alienation of work and personal life, the resulting detachment, inner-directed eroticism and vindictory fantasies of a young factory worker. Psychological rather than fully political, the film seems to drift off into an abstract, existential stance which the director himself acknowledges as potentially escapist in the contemporary Argentine context. The film is politically constructive, however, to the extent that it persistently lays bare the disjunction between personal experience and the “official” version of reality, deconstructing the alienating effect of modern mass communication. Raymundo Gleyzer’s beautifully fluid camera, the masterful editing and sound work, and the accuracy and openness with which the director assesses the merits and shortcomings of his own film make Bebe Kamin a director to watch.

Ricardo Wulicher’s *QUEBRACHO* (1974) is more ambitious in scope and more explicitly political in theme. Like the Cuban film *LUCIA\**, *QUEBRACHO* consists of three autonomous fictional segments which portray a specific historical and economic process at three different moments. During the major part of this century an essential element in the leather tanning process was extracted from the quebracho tree, indigenous to Argentina. Wulicher uses this industry as a paradigm of neo-colonialist operations, exposing the alternatively reinforcing growth of militancy on the part of the workers and the escalation of repressive tactics on the rest of the industrialists. In the end the neo-colonialists see fit to use their ultimate weapon. They shut down the factories and move on to the African mimosa groves which they themselves, with great foresight, had planted sixty years earlier.

Lautaro Murda, one of the lead actors in *QUEBRACHO*, directed the third Argentine feature, *LA RAULITO* (1974). This measured and moving portrait of a social outcast is based on the real-life case of a woman whom the state continues to confine on grounds of insanity. La Raulito lives among the street urchins and passes herself off as male. (“It’s not that I want to be a man; I just don’t want to be a woman.”) Unaided in any lasting way by either the ineffectual pity of the “liberal” doctor or the fatherly generosity of the middle-aged newspaper vendor who eventually begins making sexual advances, La Raulito is forced to hang out among the very young. Fiercely independent and determined, she escapes her captors time and time again. The film is a heart-warmer and a tear-jerker, and Marilina Ross gives a brilliant performance. In

light of its lack of social analysis, the film does not seem sufficiently potent politically to explain why both director and star have received death threats from right-wing terrorist groups. (An attack on his home prevented Murda from attending the Pesaro festival.)

Despite periodic lapses into “liberalization” over the past decade, the level of repression of workers and militants has been consistently high in Argentina. Before Peron’s return several filmmakers—most notably Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, directors of *LA HORA DE LOS HORNOS*\* (*THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES*, 1967)—had to work clandestinely. Currently, however, all cultural workers on the left are under serious threat of exile, imprisonment and death, as representatives from the Grupo Cine de la Base urgently stressed at the festival. The contrast between this collective’s first effort—*LOS TRAIDORES*\* (*THE TRAITORS*, 1973), a color feature which traces the progressive corruption and final betrayal of a Peronist labor leader. Their recent black and white short, *ME MATAN SI NO TRABAJO, Y SI TRABAJO ME MATAN*\* (*THEY KILL ME IF I DON'T WORK AND IF I WORK THEY KILL ME*), is eloquent testimony to the adverse conditions now facing Argentine filmmakers. Though also made clandestinely and distributed outside established circuits, *THE TRAITORS* brought an ambitious script and large cast together in a comparatively polished effort.

*ME MATAN SI NO TRABAJO*, on the other hand, lacks internal cohesion and is so “imperfect,” to use Julio Garcia Espinosa’s term, as to seem more a set of film notes than a finished product. It is the only film to be completed in Argentina since the promulgation of a new law which prescribes eight years in prison for anyone engaged in producing material which might foment “terrorism.” Thus this film is an extreme example of the contradiction—not to say the absurdity—of applying universal first world critical canons to film produced in and destined for such hostile environments. Like all Latin American cinema, this film especially must be viewed in the context of its mode of production and the circumstances surrounding and determining that process. In order to continue producing cinema under such threatening conditions, the Cine de la Base group developed what they call the Vietnamese system” of film production: endless ingenuity and constant reliance on the masses.

An audience who did not participate in the events recapitulated in this film is in a sense superfluous to it. Extremely taxing working conditions, combined with the sudden and premature deaths of two fellow workers, prompt a strike in a factory in the Matanza area of Buenos Aires. In cases where the factory physician had recommended aspirin and the therapy of getting back to work, independent physicians diagnosed severe lead poisoning affecting seventy-nine out of eighty-one workers examined. Only through the combination of all available tactics were the striking workers able to convince the company to meet their demands. Tactics included work stoppages, soup kitchens, Parliamentary channels, mass demonstrations, and the intervention of the ERP



(Popular Revolutionary Army) guerrillas.

The final Argentine offering, added at the last minute, was as pointless, manipulative and offensively anti-popular as the *Cine de la Base* piece was urgent, direct, and committed to the popular struggle. To film *CEREMONIAS* (*CEREMONIES*), Carlos Cytrynowsky and his collaborators contracted a dozen down-and-out middle-aged men and women to spend a week living together in close quarters, allowing themselves to be filmed at any and all moments, in exchange for free room, board and liquor. Using a direct cinema technique, Wiseman-like in style with echoes of Buñuel's *VIRIDIANA* and Cassavetes at his most impious, the camera closely tracks the action. It soon becomes apparent, however, that any action is artificially provoked by the camera itself and by the presence of bizarre "props" furnished by the filmmakers (huge stuffed teddy bears, straw hats which read "Los intocables"—the untouchables). The camera shows no pity; it is brutally and increasingly intrusive, focusing on people snoring, urinating, on a man powdering his genital area against lice, and turning an alternately shy and defiant woman into a bizarre odalisque of lovely, full breasts and aged, toothless grin. The sound (by Bebe Kamin, director of *EL BUHO*) is also artificial and distorting. Almost always nonsynchronous, it further dehumanizes the film's "subjects" by eliminating their verbal responses to the ordeal they are undergoing. The level of intrusiveness, voyeurism and manipulation is such that the viewer begins desperately to hope that these specimens under microscopic lens will seize the camera and turn it on their tormentors. Unfortunately, they never do in this unredeeming and unredeemable, film.

## THE CARIBBEAN

Finally, two Cuban features, a full-length Cuban documentary on Puerto Rico, and the first Haitian documentary—also feature-length—constitutes a major Caribbean contribution, which round out the Latin American offerings at the festival. Both Puerto Rican and the Haitian documentaries are of major political importance. The latter, directed by Arnold Antonin in collaboration with the 18th of May Organization, traces popular resistance from the indigenous Taino population of pre-Colombian times through the revolution against the French and up to the iron-fisted regimes of "Papa Doc" Duvalier, self-appointed "president for life," and his successor, Baby Doc, who is literally selling the blood of his people on the international market. The rough-edged and somewhat belabored aspects of this first film effort are offset by the urgency and import of its content.

*PUERTO RICO\**, by Fernando Perez and Jesus Diaz, is a compilation documentary based on archive material and borrowed footage from several other films on Puerto Rico currently in distribution. Conceived in support of the struggle for independence, the film focuses on the Puerto Rican situation from the fifties to the present. Rising consciousness of Puerto Rico's neocolonial subordination to the economic interests of the United States makes such a film particularly

timely. But the unevenness and dated or repetitive nature of some of the material limits the film's potential political impact on the current situation. (3)

The two Cuban features were both original and provocative, as one has come to expect from this revolutionary film industry. *EL OTRO FRANCISCO* (*THE OTHER FRANCISCO*), based on a 19th century abolitionist novel, offers an entirely new approach to the process of cinematic adaptation of literary "classics." Neither a "faithful adaptation" nor a "new interpretation" of the original, Sergio Giral's film carries out a critical operation on its own literary inspiration, questioning the novel's characterization, its psychological, sociological and historical accuracy, and its underlying political motivation. A dynamic tension is created between the artificial melodrama of the novelistic sequences and the brutal immediacy of a more realistic view of events. Francisco, the docile and refined house slave who is turned out to the fields in punishment for his love of a mulatto maid, passively accepts the sadistic abuse of his master and the slave captain until he is driven to suicide. Critical of this version of events, the film analyzes this passivity and abnegation as projections of Anselmo Suarez Romero, the genteel habanero who wrote the novel. Against Francisco's resignation, the filmmakers juxtapose the rebel determination, which they view as a more accurate and more constructive response to the conditions of slavery.

*DE CIERTA MANERA* (*IN A CERTAIN WAY*) is an even more unusual film. The first Cuban feature made by a woman, it is also something of an anomaly because of its contemporary setting since most Cuban film projects seem to require the perspective provided by historical distance. Sara Gomez' film focuses on the problems of sex and ethnic culture in a society which has tried to downplay the existence of both racism and sexism while working toward their elimination. It deals with the persistence of atavistic traditionalism in a society which has undergone fifteen years of revolutionary transformation; with the persistence of class differences in a society which aspires to be classless; with social sectors still not fully integrated into the revolutionary process.

The attempt to integrate or hybridize the traditionally separate modalities of documentary and fiction film has characterized the revolutionary Cuban film industry. (*MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT*\* is a particularly striking example of the dialectical interaction between personal life (the fictional line) and historical circumstances (the documentary context); *GIRON*\* (*BAY OF PIGS*) uses different techniques to achieve a similar effect.) Sara Gomez here develops yet another approach, using "real people" whose names are listed in the credits along with the professional actors. The anecdotal core of the film is a love story between Mario, a mulatto factory worker with traditional ideas and a devotion to the mystical (and macho) Cuban cult of Abacua, and Yolanda, a divorced school teacher from a more comfortable milieu who is committed to sexual emancipation but whose teaching and pedagogical methods are less advanced. They interact

against a backdrop of real-life people with real-life problems. As in LUCIA\*, the other Cuban production which focuses on sexual politics, the questions remain to a large extent unanswered; it is the process of asking them which gives the film its meaning.

Both these films share a certain didacticism revealed, for example, in their frequent use of voice-over narration. Both disrupt the immersion-in-the movie syndrome using a variety of methods, including the technique of presenting the key scene (Francisco's suicide, Mario's denouncing his friend's absenteeism and deception to the factory assembly) before the opening credits as a sort of intro to the film. Suspense is thus eliminated in favor of a critical examination of the process. Believing that all human experience educates, and should be so recognized, Cuban cinema rejects the artificial split between the "educational" and the "entertainment" film. The risk is, of course, that in the emphasis on such explicit didacticism, more subtle levels of meaning are sacrificed. To the degree that the presence of the narrator works to circumscribe the questions asked, the films run a certain risk of condescending to rather than enhancing the critical faculties of the audience.

As Julio Garcia Espinosa defined it in his famous essay "Towards an Imperfect Cinema," Cuban cinema seeks the demise of the directorial "star system" and the elimination of the split between the artist-agent and the audience-object. It seeks to place the means of artistic production, too long concentrated in the hands of a privileged minority, into the hands of the masses. Until such a time as its creators and its audience are one and the same, Cuban cinema rejects "perfect" cinema and those who support it and seeks its audience, theme and the embryonic aesthetics of a genuinely popular art in the ongoing struggle to transform material existence. Despite their shortcomings, EL OTRO FRANCISCO and especially DE CIERTA MANERA take new and significant steps in the desired direction.

#### AFTERTHOUGHTS

Because the contrast between the content and the setting of the festival was substantial and often disconcerting, this attempt to order and evaluate the Pesaro experience seems somehow incomplete without mention of the world outside the theater: the gentle beaches lined with umbrellas and bathers even in September; the midday fritto misto di pesce (deep-fried shrimp and squid) and 2:00 a.m. pizza at a sidewalk cafe; the diminutive band playing brassily in the seaside park as the nocturnal fog winds itself like a feather boa around musicians, spectators and streetlights—looking for all the world like a scene out of AMARCORD. Less nostalgic aspects of the festival also come to mind—the difficulty of trying to set up genuine lines of communication in four languages, the constraint of being the only gringa in the crowd and fully cognizant of the valid basis for suspicion of those who assumed you to be an itinerant film critic for the CIA. And, of course, the combined disappointment at the subdued character of this, my first experience at

Pesaro, and the regret that it may be the last.

## Notes

[1.](#) An asterisk designates films which are currently being distributed in the United States. New Yorker is the major distributor of Brazilian films, Tricontinental Film Center of the major films from Spanish-speaking countries. In other cases, the distributor will be noted in parentheses.

[2.](#) The Emergency Committee to Defend Latin American Filmmakers has recently been formed to coordinate efforts in this country in defense of the growing number of Latin American actors and filmmakers imprisoned by hostile regimes. They have begun with a campaign to free Jorge Muller and Chilean actress Carmen Bueno (THE PROMISED LAND). For further information, contact the Committee at: 333 Ave. of the Americas, NY NY 10014.

[3.](#) Because of space considerations, I have omitted five Latin American films from my account: the marvelous Uruguayan cartoon IN THE JUNGLE THERE IS LOTS TO DO because it has been in U.S. distribution for some time; the Peruvian Luis Figueroa's ethnographic documentary CHIERAQUE BATALLA RITUAL, as well as three Mexican offerings (Eduardo Maldonado's ATENCINGO, 1973, and UNA Y OTRA VEZ—TIME AND AGAIN, 1975; and Felipe Cazals' LOS QUE VIVEN DONDE SOPLA EL VIENTO SUAVE) because none indicates any significant deviation from the narrowly defined and essentially static cinematic norms of their respective countries.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

### **Berkeley projectionists protest lock out**

**by John Hess**

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, p. 35

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

In Berkeley, California, Local 169 of the International Alliance of Theater and Stage Employees has been picketing in front of a United Artists Theater Circuit movie house for several months while the established contract grievance procedure is put in operation. Union projectionists have been locked out by the bosses who have employed scabs to project the films. The conflict is now in binding federal arbitration.

At issue is the growing speedup requirement around the country that projectionists tend more and more projectors as single screen theaters become twins, four-plexes, and even six screen theaters. In some cases projectionists shuttle between several fully automated theaters. Reduced projection quality is a side effect of this move to multi-screen automated theaters. Because the film projection is automated, there is no possibility for the projectionist to make minor corrections on the machine until the entire film has been shown. The whole film is on one huge reel or platter and the single projector can't be worked on without stopping the film. Managers seem to be taking a customer-be-damned attitude.

In other places around the country, when the projectors are in the same booth, the projectionists welcome the automation and speedup because it means higher pay for them. They seem unaware of the rapid proletarianization of their work which used to be skilled craft and is being reduced to that of button pusher. In the Berkeley case the booths are four stories apart and the projectionist must walk through the auditorium to get from one booth to the other. When the theater added two more screens this spring, the regular projectionist was an older man who had worked the theater since it began 43 years ago. When he refused to work the two booths and tried to begin the grievance procedure, management kicked him out and began the lock out. Even though the union offered to pay for a second projectionist during voluntary arbitration, the bosses locked out the union and brought in

scabs. The union has finally forced the case into binding arbitration and is optimistic of the outcome. They also report the picket has been a big success, substantially reducing the theater's business.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

### **The last word: Out of the dark—building a community audience**

**by the Editors**

from *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975, p. 36

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004

Most of the time, films are thought of as fairly autonomous objects. They exist either without an audience, or with an ideal, abstract, and homogeneous one. Even radical filmmaking and film criticism frequently reflect this underlying assumption. Some filmmakers, such as Costa Gavras and Pontecorvo, are considered radical for injecting left political content in traditional film form, while others, such as Godard and many Latin Americans, are radicals for altering form to present a left wing result.

But, as long as a film audience sees such films after buying a ticket, sitting in isolation during a screening, and leaving when the lights come back on, nothing much of political significance will happen. Political consciousness and action grow out of study, discussion, exchange and struggle. As long as the film experience is passive, a particular film's political message will either be accepted or rejected on the basis of what the audience already knows or feels. For sure, *BATTLE OF ALGIERS* and films like it stir up incredible emotions, but when this emotion is not linked to knowledge and understanding or directed toward social action, it dissipates very quickly.

For film to have a truly political use and effect, there must be some intervention in the viewing situation. In their manifesto, "Toward a Third World Cinema," Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino painted out this need for participation of the audience. In the 1960s Newsreel people traveled with their films and used them to raise consciousness and organize. More recently, women's liberation groups have used films to attract women and initiate discussions.

In Toronto recently, with the help of Tricontinental Film Center in the United States, a group of people started the Development Education Centre (DEC) to distribute relevant political films on a non-profit basis.

DEC's idea was not just to distribute the films, but to use them very specifically as educational tools. To further this concept, they sponsored monthly film forums where the films were shown and then discussed. After each forum they ran off and distributed a newsletter which summarized the discussion.

In turn, these screenings served as a meeting place for political and cultural activists. By the third forum, plans to develop a cultural festival had begun. The newsletter report began,

“This meeting was a result of the wish to continue the discussion of the previous week and the desire to progress from talk to practical manifestations of cultural ideas—the suggestion was made to work toward a cultural festival.”

Also, the forum offered militant Québécois filmmaker Arthur Lamothe an opportunity to show and discuss his film on the construction industry in Québec. The DEC forums demonstrate the energizing power of combining radical films with audience discussion.

A closely related question is that of the actual audience. A film's political impact obviously must be measured by the real audience that sees it. If a filmmaker simply proclaims her or his film was made for workers, but it's never shown outside of university walls, the claim is more than a little ridiculous. Similarly, the most popular and accessible type of political film, such as *BURN*, is only having a marginal political impact if it is being shown at \$3.50 a ticket in an art theater in an upper middle class neighborhood. We have to ask who is actually seeing films.

In Dayton, Ohio, this past summer, a group of radicals called the Community Media Workshop developed a significant project. In six different working class neighborhoods, they set up media programs in the public parks. The evening shows, called Summer Lights, combined local talent such as country music singers, radical films, some socialist speakers on current issues such as a campaign to fight utility rate increases, and a community slide-and-tape show. Members of the group went into the communities in advance, taking slide photos and interviewing people in the neighborhood about themselves, their concerns, and their community. In the process of making the slide-and-tape shows, considerable interest was generated for the big night. Augmented by posters and leaflets, every show had a good opening night with attentive viewers of all ages.

The audiences not only had a chance to see and hear themselves, but also to hear their neighbors talking in their own wards about local issues. The slide-and-tape shows combined recognition (such as a comic survey of all the dogs on a block), new experiences (a set of interviews with women on what they think of the wages-for-housework idea) and learning (a lesson on electric company rip-offs). Following the first show, the media teams returned to do material for a second, and in some cases a third. Responses to the shows and the organizers were extremely positive. Begun as the test of an idea, the project is continuing



by concentrating on two communities where additional political work will be going on.

This project and the DEC forums in Toronto are exemplary combinations of radical media work with political efforts, with each complementing and strengthening the other. Both projects have a very specific aim and context, which are their strengths, and both suggest new possibilities for using films politically.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)